"Great Writers."

EDITED BY

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LIFE OF BALZAC.

LIFE

OF

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

BY

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LONDON

WALTER SCOTT, 24 WARWICK LANE

1890

NOTE.

BALZAC is a great subject, and this is a small book. But it is a book for a series in which compression is a necessity. And, moreover, my methods of work are incompatible with the production of extensive volumes. A literary task, as I conceive it, is generally ill executed if, when it is done, the labour of omission, though chiefly concealed, is not found to have been its heaviest part.

Obligations to all sorts of books may, if one is working upon Balzac, be taken for granted. They are unmistakable and important—even if amidst the mass of miscellaneous material, and amidst Critical writings of high value, there is discovered no single Biography at once broad in conception and finished in treatment.

Let the less obvious debt to many friends—who, on one point or on another, are especially qualified to criticize or counsel—be gratefully acknowledged.

F. W.

LONDON, *December*, 1889.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

CHAPTER XII.

LIFE OF BALZAC.

CHAPTER I.

BEFORE HE BECAME AN AUTHOR.

HOW many people shall I displease—how many content—if I set forth by declaring that among the writers whose successes in pure Literature this century allows, five alone must be accounted for ever influential—Goethe, Wordsworth, Balzac, Dickens, Browning? In England, only one of these writers has very great popularity. The author of "David Copperfield" so planned and executed his work that he appeals to the large public hardly less certainly than to those who concern themselves in seriousness with the problems of Art; and we need not be occupied with the momentary rejection of him by superfine Criticism, and by the average University young man. Dickens is for the world, after all. But to be sure to care profoundly for Dickens's peers, you must be, perhaps, not incapable of philosophic thought, or not intolerant of the notions of a Society quite other than your own, or not insensitive to the technical qualities of exquisite work—or, at the very least, you must be, in Wordsworth's phrase, a "grave

liver." Balzac, as much as any one of those writers whom I have associated with him, asks from the readers of his books some touch of kinship, some faculty for the understanding of his aims. His fifty volumes can have nothing to impart to people who are hungry for farce, or athirst only for story. Would, indeed, that his humour were more prominent, his hand sometimes a little lighter! He is a study to be seriously undertaken. He is an illumination thrown upon Life. And if he is to be met by you at all along the road, he must be privileged to be met half way.

Balzac was born at Tours on Saint Honoré's Day—May the 16th—1799. The house is No. 39, Rue Royale—Rue Nationale, its latest appellation—a house of three good storeys, with a shop against the street: at present, "Foucher: Flanelle de Santé: Linge de Toilette."

One remembers writers of genius who, while their work has been done in the language of their birthplace, have themselves been the product of several nationalities, whose differences and characteristics told plainly on their labour. It is interesting, even if it is hardly important, to notice that Balzac, unlike these—unlike Heine, or Zola, or even the author of "The Ring and the Book"—was of a single stock; that he was as simply and typically French as Shakespeare was simply and typically English; and that the very heart of France, her central plains, gave birth to the artist who was to picture and to chronicle, to probe into and to record, the whole of her life. We shall notice, too, that Balzac had no early and inevitable connection with literary society—he speaks

of Tours as "the least literary of cities"—and again, we shall notice that, as is usual in France, academic training, which does justice to mediocrity—nay, which may bestow on mediocrity, for a period, the distinctions of excellence—counted for very little in the formation of his mind. Its *rôle* with genius must in any case be small. Balzac was too creative to be chiefly a "scholar," though it is needless to say that books as well as men, great libraries as well as "women's hearts," entered into and became a part of the material of his work.

Balzac's father, who was born in Languedoc, in 1746—and who was therefore fifty-three years old when the son through whom he was to be remembered lay in the cradle—had been an advocate, officially employed under the Government of Louis the Sixteenth. He had influential friends and influential enemies in those times of storm, and he may perhaps be considered to have been fairly fortunate when, in the later years of the Eighteenth Century, he was given an appointment of a kind unfamiliar to him, and was sent into the North to assist in the organization of provisions for the army. The elder Balzac remained in that service; and the Commissariat of the twenty-second division was his especial charge, when, in 1797, he married the young daughter of one of his chiefs—a chief who was at the same time director of hospitals in Paris.

The Balzacs were settled at Tours, comfortably off, as regards money matters, and of good social repute, when the eldest of their family was born. That was the future novelist. After him came two sisters and a brother. The brother, it is chronicled for us somewhat vaguely, led his

life in "the colonies;" but it is to be feared that he did not do this until he had succeeded in making himself not particularly desirable at home. Laurence, the younger sister, died young, after five years of marriage. Laure, the sister who came next to Honoré, played a part not necessarily more eventful in itself, but certainly more important for the public. She was the first of Honoré's intimate friends—the most sympathetic, perhaps, of all his confidants. In his youth, at all events, he had no secrets from her. She was discretion and appreciation incarnate. And some years after his death—when the world was full of fantastic misrepresentations of the man and the artist—things cheaply vivid or simply silly, treating the writer of the "Comédie Humaine" as above all an "eccentric," an "original," as the French contemptuously say—it was Madame Laure Surville who gave us a picture of Balzac which, notwithstanding its slightness, it was possible to respect and to believe in.

Honoré had at one time a great opinion of his mother, and for his father he entertained a more spontaneous and gentle affection. But with neither of them had he anything approaching an ideal relationship. His father was divided from him, in one sense, by a barrier of too many years. His mother, there can hardly be a question, was, in the household, obstinately dominant. She was severe in her youth; nervous, uncertain, and fussy when middle life came upon her; better, I think, in an old age prolonged so far that it allowed her to survive him. Truthful as Madame Surville's accounts are, generally, no doubt a family pride and a legitimate tenderness united to prompt her to a rather rose-coloured view of

the parents, and of the bearing of the mother towards the children. "My father," she writes, "had much in him of Montaigne, of Rabelais, and of Uncle Toby." "My mother, who was rich and beautiful and very much younger than her husband, had a rare vivacity of imagination and mind. She had an indefatigable activity, firmness of will, and a boundless devotion to her kindred."

The last-named quality, though it was scarcely shown, cannot be said to be disproved, by the circumstance that instead of keeping Honoré with her as a baby, Madame de Balzac put him out to nurse, in the fashion followed by many of her fellow-countrywomen to this day. Beyond the gates of Tours there was found an excellent person who was willing to be Honoré's foster-mother. Along with Laure, who was in charge of the same woman, Honoré, at four years old, was brought back to his parents. Certainly he was never "spoilt" in his childhood. He was obedient as a matter of course, and little else seems to have been expected of him. Though he showed no aptitude as a scholar, he was still very young when there were wont to fall from him remarks or answers of singular penetration and meditative wisdom. The look in the brown eyes was still so simple, the lines of the mouth were at once so childish and so calm, the whole face, framed by the dark and ample hair, was so unvexed and naïve, that it was taken for granted he was capable as yet of very little. His seed fell upon stony ground, in the family circle. "Honoré"—his mother was accustomed to say to him after one of his searching observations—"it is im-

possible that you can understand what you have just said!"

At seven years old they sent him to the "collége de Vendôme"—a school founded by the Oratorians, and then a good deal esteemed. The greater part of his father's household, Madame Surville tells us,—the father, the mother, the mother's mother probably, as she lived with them, and the little Laure herself—were accustomed to repair twice yearly to Vendôme: at Easter and on the day for distributing the prizes. But no prizes were for Honoré. And at last, at fourteen years old, the boy was brought home, Monsieur Mareschal, the head of the school, reporting that he had fallen into a state of *coma*. Fragile and thin, too dreamy to answer the questions that were put to him, too indifferent to the things of the moment that interested everybody else, his health became really a cause of anxiety to his kinsfolk. His grandmother lamented the pressure of the modern education of 1813. But Monsieur Mareschal was no doubt right in asserting that with the young boy's condition school work had had nothing to do. He was an indolent pupil. His tasks had never been performed. Honoré, however, had devoured volume upon volume—in hours of holiday, in hours of punishment.

In the story of "Louis Lambert"—in the earlier part of it—there is written, with more than the accuracy of history, the tale of Balzac's schooldays. All that a sensitive boy suffered, all that he thought, the events of every day, and the crises of his school-life, "Louis Lambert" records. It was Balzac himself who, when he ought to have been busy with his appointed

exercises, wrote that treatise "On the Will." It was Balzac's own master who burnt it in annoyance at the neglect of the hour's proper business. Years afterwards the novelist is found to be still regretting the destruction of that first essay. By that time he had willingly acquiesced in—nay, he had ardently desired—oblivion for a score of stories which had been written for bread. He had no mercy for studies undertaken to keep the wolf from the door, or to teach the writer method in his Art. They were a means; not an end. But he had only tender thoughts for a treatise done almost in childhood—for a thing which would have proved him, he held, to have been not far from a genius, at a time when the wise world set him down for a dullard.

The boy's health soon recovered itself in what, chiefly it seems through the insight and the action of his father, became the freedom of his home-life. He had no neglected tasks to be scolded over; his mother's quite genuine affection for him made her indulgent just now; and the boy, though allowed no doubt to read for his own pleasure, was counselled to spend much time in the open air, and in long walks in the country. Then began his true love for the features of Touraine—his love for the large gentleness of all its landscape. He would linger perhaps first on the long quiet city quays, the sunset in the west throwing a glow over the twin towers of the cathedral—Saint-Gatien was always impressive to him, less no doubt for its size than for the loveliness of its proportions and the exquisiteness of its ornament. Or he would cross the bridge over the broad river, feasting his eyes upon the green country and the shining Loire.

The ruin of Plessis—in itself unimportant, but calling up so much of History and so much of Romance—was but a mile or two away. And beyond the northern shore of the river, above the village, the transpontine suburb rather, of Saint-Symphorien—with its shops of cooper and of basket-maker, its business of the wine-cask and of vintage-time—the land rose gradually, vineyard by vineyard, and from the ridge of the long low hills there was the outlook over all the breadth and all the opulence of Touraine. Here began certainly, not only Balzac's love for the land he was born in, but that appreciation of Landscape in general, which, never forced upon us with effusion or affectation, is yet so evident in his riper work.

And, while he was still at Tours—at leisure first, and, a little later, a day-scholar—the boy began to be conscious, of a vocation, shall we say?—at least of the possession of faculties not every one's. He had what his sister well describes as "*l'intuition de la renommée*"; ambition stirred within him even sooner, perhaps, than genius. His family, however, was little occupied with this, and what was remarked was the continued absence of academic distinction. At the end of 1814, there was change of place, and again change of teaching, Monsieur de Balzac being called to Paris to direct the provisioning of another section of the French army. The quarter of Paris which was selected for residence was central, yet a little obscure—that quarter of "Le Marais," whose later aspects Alphonse Daudet has depicted for us, strikingly yet with delicate minuteness, in the book which I must allow myself to consider as at bottom the best of his novels—"Froment jeune et

Risler aîné." When the Balzac family were established there, Honoré continued his education under a Monsieur Lepître,[1] of the Rue St. Louis, and under a couple of gentlemen—Messieurs Sganzer and Beuzelin—in the Rue de Thorigny. One records all this with painful accuracy, aware all the while what a small part it really played in the storing of the mind, in the development of the imagination. But a more potent influence has soon to be chronicled. From the year 1816, young Balzac attended lectures at the Sorbonne—came home from them his head full of the eloquence and the logic "des Guizot, des Villemain, des Cousin," says his sister. He read now in the public libraries much matter bearing on the discourses of these men; and he knew the pleasures of book-hunting on the riverside stalls, whence, in the days of Louis the Eighteenth, the rare and the desirable had not quite vanished.

The elder Balzac now wished his son to be acquainted with the Law, and for three years—until, indeed, he had passed the last necessary examination—Honoré was reading in the chambers of the learned. It is obvious that a time so spent could not but leave traces on his writings. Balzac's Law is not of the kind that has been spoken of contemptuously as "novelists' Law," or "dramatists'." That, one may take for granted, even if one receives with something less than full credulity Madame Surville's account of the function of "César Birotteau" on the shelves of a notary she knew. That solicitor gravely assured her that this particular novel was

[1] This very name—Lepître—was given by Balzac to the master of Félix de Vandenesse in "Le Lys dans la Vallée."

not among his law-books by accident or for recreation. It was there, he protested, as a text-book, invaluable for reference in any question of Bankruptcy.

Balzac the elder had hoped that with his son the practice of the Law would follow its study. A good opening was, he thought, secured. Honoré set his face against the project. He explained, with impulsiveness, it seems, and with eloquence, his longing to be a writer. The stuff of a writer was in him. And his father was so far convinced, by his pleadings, of the uselessness of opposition at present, that he agreed that Honoré should, for two years at least, be on his probation. Let him, in that time if it were possible, display his talent and justify his choice. The concession was already much; for it came at a time when authorship was very poorly paid, and was generally in fact what it is still imagined to be—the resource of the wholly unpractical. The concession came, too, from a man whom events had but just reminded that he was himself in the last period of his life, and that the position of those whom he cared for must be assured soon, if he was to be a witness of its attainment. The truth in the noble lines which Emerson, long years afterwards, addressed to the failing—

> "It is time to be old,
> To take in sail!"—

had been brought home to Balzac's father when he was seventy-four; and in a fashion terribly prosaic. Government had placed him on the retired list. He was shorn —by that and by private losses too—of the greater part

of his income. He and the family—all of them except Honoré—withdrew to Villeparisis, eighteen miles from Paris, in the Seine-et-Marne. An attic was taken for Honoré, near the Library of the Arsenal (the only library, it is said, which was still unknown to him), where he would be free to study.

Established in the attic, almost *incognito*—for his friends, lest the experiment should be unsuccessful, were informed that he was sojourning with a cousin at Alby—the youth's view of the situation was cheerful, as became his years; thoughtful, as became his insight. "I find" —he writes to Laure, the companionable sister, away now in the country—"that the time that I shall spend here will enable me to amass a treasure of delightful remembrances. To live as I like to live, to work as I like to work, to be idle if I wish it—thinking of you, and knowing you are happy—to have, for mistress, Rousseau's Julie, and for friends, La Fontaine and Molière!—ah! if that could last for ever!" Of living friends, the chief one seems to have been an excellent Monsieur Dablin, who came from time to time to see young Balzac in the attic, and who, if he could say of his *protégé*, with the most reputable personage of Eighteenth Century comedy, "I never in my life denied him—my advice," could say also that the occasions were many on which his purse was proffered even more readily than his counsel.[1] There were times, indeed, when Honoré de Balzac needed its help. His allowance, which must in any case have been small, was yet scantier than it should have been, for his

[1] To Monsieur Théodore Dablin, "Les Chouans" afterwards came to be dedicated: "The first book, to the first friend."

mother built chiefly upon Balzac's poverty the hope that he would, ere long, renounce a career which seemed to her romantic and impossible. That, of course, he could never do. He lived contentedly, in the main, his narrow life : it was, at all events, a life of discipline.

The future analyst of French Society aimed, in the first instance, at poetic fame. He chose "Cromwell" for a subject; "the regicide" being by no means the drama's hero. He had no intention of hurrying himself in the execution of his task. And he was already to some extent a critic. "Ideas crowd upon me, but I am stopped continually by my lack of any gift for verse-writing." Again, to his sister, "If you only knew the difficulty of such tasks! The great Racine spent two years in polishing 'Phèdre'; and it is the despair of poets." He sought inspiration in solitary walks: left the Jardin des Plantes, with its chance loungers, light of tongue, for those heights of Père-Lachaise, from which, in his maturest fiction, he makes Rastignac look forth upon the city when Le Père Goriot has been let down into the grave. He finds in his walks to Père-Lachaise "*de bonnes grosses réflexions inspiratrices.*" "There I make studies of sorrow, useful for 'Cromwell.' True sorrow is so difficult to paint; for, above all things, it demands simplicity." Then he was gay again; then a little anxious—seized already with the melancholy of the penetrating, the sadness of the finely organized. "Cromwell" was a complete failure. It was condemned by his family; condemned by a judge who was particularly bidden to pronounce upon it; condemned almost by himself. And, though it is obvious that at what was still

all but the beginning of a life of quite gigantic effort, Balzac's resources of patience and energy had not appreciably been drawn upon, there was that in him—in his life of isolation, perhaps; in his experience already of privations—which made him reflect, "What use will good fortune and pleasure be to me when my youth is gone! What is the costume to the actor, if he cannot perform the part! The old man has, after all, had his feast—he can afford to watch others while they eat. But I am young, and hungry, and there is nothing on my plate! Laura, Laura!—my two immense desires, and my only ones,—*to be famous: to be loved*—will they ever be satisfied!"

The note of pathos is certainly in the words, and, with it, the evidence of just that not unrighteous egotism which must be owned by every artist who, in a world of distractions, is to accomplish his work.

CHAPTER II.

TO THE "MAISON DU CHAT-QUI-PELOTE."

BALZAC having, as in duty bound, made his *début* in writing by a failure in Tragedy, there was thereafter, for a while, a certain measure of unhopefulness about his prospects. But he began to write sensation stories, and, sooner or later, these were sold by him to the cheap booksellers, who again sold them, vulgarly printed, to the cheapest and commonest public. You would be sorry, for your sins, to be condemned to read any great number of them. But they were serviceable to Balzac, inasmuch as he had more difficulty than most men of genius in learning his craft. He was always more fertile in thought than in the phrases which properly express it. These stories, then, taught him, as he has himself put it, "to describe scenery," and "to describe character." They helped him at least upon the way. But, to the very end—to the days when, looking round upon his work, he knew how substantial was the monument which he had built himself—Balzac remained without continual sense of form—of curious inequality in the execution of his task. His maturer art permitted him, in deserts of literary limpness, splendid oases of Style. But it never secured for him the

smoothness and the symmetry which infinitely smaller writers shared with George Sand. To the end, Balzac said things sometimes with heaviness, sometimes with the directness and the fire which appear to be inspiration.

The short sensational stories, of which he produced a great number, were all of them issued anonymously, or under pseudonyms, and "Les Chouans" was the first book to which Balzac attached his name. Before its publication, however, his somewhat speculative tendency had led him to embark in business with a young man in whom he believed. He became a printer and type-founder in the Rue des Marais St. Germain. But fortunately this enterprise was not long continued, and Balzac withdrew from it without serious disaster.

"Les Chouans" was published in 1829, and, owing to the impossibility in which Balzac found himself to execute in later life another work which he had planned to be its companion, it remains the most considerable contribution to that section of the "Comédie Humaine" which he describes as "Scènes de la Vie Militaire." Indeed the sole thing placed with it in this section of the "Comedy"—a "Comedy" thought of as a whole only when many of its pages had been written—is the quite short story, "Une Passion dans le Désert." That was suggested by a conversation Balzac had with a famous lion-tamer, Martin, and, like "La Fille aux Yeux d'Or," it is not without an element of morbidness that we need not enter into.

To go back for a moment to "Les Chouans." It was issued at first in four volumes. Its sub-title—"Brittany

in 1799"—shows it to be in some measure historical; the barrier of one complete generation standing between the day it treats of and the day when it was written. In later work, Balzac but seldom threw back the action of his story even by so much as thirty years; though more than once, in the "Études Philosophiques," he dealt with the things of a past century—in "Sur Catherine de Médicis," for instance; in "Les Proscrits," which introduces Dante; and, of course, in "Jésus-Christ en Flandre." He felt, and he often expressed, great admiration for Sir Walter Scott. It is easy to trace the influence of "the Wizard" in certain of the earlier of his writings — in their historic turn, at the least. "Les Chouans" is an example. But that influence died out as Balzac became himself; and whatever remained of the admiration for a master of pageantry and of external romance, felt by a master of the action of the soul, by a profound analyst of life, is but a proof that the deepest of novelists, like one of the deepest of musicians—Schumann scarcely requires to be named—excelled in the faculty of comprehensive appreciation, and was just in criticism because he was generous and far-seeing.[1]

The autumn of 1829 saw the completion, and the

[1] Certainly the admiration itself was by no means quick to depart, for it was when he was thirty-eight years old that Balzac wrote to Madame de Hanska, "Twelve years ago I said of Sir Walter Scott just what you say of him. By his side Lord Byron is almost nothing. 'Kenilworth' is the *chef-d'œuvre* for completeness; 'St. Ronan's Well' for detail and patience; 'The Chronicles of the Canongate' for feeling; for History, 'Ivanhoe'; for Poetry, 'The Antiquary.'"

spring of 1830 the publication, of the first of Balzac's writings which attains to exquisiteness. This is the tale of quiet bourgeois life, and of unhappy travel beyond its boundaries, to which he gave the name of "La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote." Let us translate it as "At the Sign of the Cat playing Ball." Though the "Human Comedy" as a whole had not been planned at that time, it was already Balzac's scheme to deal not quite unsystematically with certain phases of the life he could observe or imagine; and "La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote" took its place in his thought from the beginning, as one of several studies "*de la vie privée*." It is itself a picture in the manner of the better Dutchmen, quite as completely as was the noteworthy canvas which Théodore de Sommervieux, the young lover in the tale, painted of the shop and the parlour which were the surroundings of his mistress.

I have said that it is exquisite, yet it is possible to be exquisite without being complete, and in "La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote" technical deficiencies seem to be observable which would be searched for in vain in another "Dutch picture," wrought by Balzac four or five years later—"Eugénie Grandet." "La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote" is shorter than "Eugénie Grandet" —that is, it would fill about a hundred and sixty pages, instead of about three hundred pages, of an English romance, issued in circulating-library form—and there are portions in which the more pronounced brevity is felt to be a loss. For "La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote," though it has not in it the making of a big novel, is not a true "short story," whose theme is simple,

whose scanty incidents occur at no long intervals. Infinite mental changes, the rise and the destruction of many a hope, have to be depicted in the bourgeois tale; and illustrations are perhaps rather wanting of the fashion in which Augustine, its sympathetic heroine, proved herself lacking in the range and the capacity exacted at the end by an artist who, as a lover, had been satisfied with sweetness and beauty at the beginning. Nor is there made visible the means by which the Duchesse de Carigliano supplied the need which the young Madame de Sommervieux could not content. These things we have to take a little upon trust. It may be that the quite final treatment of the subject would have included, not their statement only, but their proof.

When that has been said, however, "with submission," —with great deference—the rest must be a more than cordial, it must be a grateful recognition of the genius the tale displays. What definiteness of conception! What an unerring analysis! And the reflective faculties are moving all the while on so exalted a plane; and the style, here rarely faulty, is sharpened not seldom to exquisiteness, as the selected word bears finely its burthen of feeling and thought. One source of Balzac's greatness is especially evident in his dealing with the persons of this story; and that is the capacity he shares, as I suppose, with Shakespeare, Goethe, Browning only —for I do not know what fourth, except himself, we are to add to these three—to hold the scales of justice evenly, to be sublimely impartial. Some of the novelists and poets who have impressed the world

the most, have at bottom been impassioned advocates. Balzac can paint for us here, with penetrating fairness—and it is mentioned now but as an example of his method throughout all his life—on the one hand, the artist and the woman of Society; on the other, the shopkeeper's household, the draper himself, his meaner wife, the assistant, the apprentice, the daughters Virginie and Augustine.

Monsieur Guillaume is a draper who has secured himself a competence; a man who is in accord with his spouse, who has some tenderness for his daughters, but a man whose best satisfactions and highest excitements have been found always in the incidents of business, and whose reputation for discernment is based surely on the proudest deed of his career—for did he not prophesy "the Lecocq failure" when its probability was hidden from every other draper in Paris! Théodore de Sommervieux—studied by the author far less profoundly; a fair but ordinary type of an artist, impulsive, uncertain, and somewhat exacting—is smitten with the dainty beauty of Augustine, with whom he comes into chance contact; and, through the agency of a common friend, he succeeds in marrying her. From the first, all her heart is given to him. She has been looked at, too, with longing eyes, by Joseph Lebas, her father's chief assistant; but for Lebas, Monsieur Guillaume has other intentions—the elder daughter, Virginie, is for Joseph Lebas. Both are married on the same day. Joseph Lebas, who is indeed a good fellow as well as a capable tradesman, manages to forget his rival's wife and behaves very well to Virginie. The business prospers, and,

under the later *régime*, the apprentices at the sign of the Cat Playing Ball are not expected to leave the dinner-table at the beginning of the dessert. The steady comfort, the Chardin-like sobriety, of the Rue St. Denis, are contrasted with Augustine's fortunes, with her ecstasy and her sadness. Her nature's need for romance carried her into places to which she had not really the flexibility to adapt herself. Yet, surveying what seemed to her the pure mechanism of the life of the draper, which Virginie shared, she experienced, says Balzac, "I know not how much pride in her sorrows, remembering that at least their source had been an eighteen months' happiness, worth more to her than a thousand lives empty of passion and joy." It is never concealed from us that Augustine carried within her the seeds of her misery. Wedded to a painter, "*Augustine préférait un regard au plus beau tableau. Le seul sublime qu'elle connût était celui du cœur.*" Thence—though one must remember also a certain shallowness of heart which was her husband's: some defect which forbade him to be great as a man though it allowed him to be brilliant as a craftsman—thence her failure, her decline. A tombstone at Montmartre records her death, when she was twenty-seven; and the reflection of a friend at her grave—Balzac himself, was it, or was it Joseph Lebas?—sums up the whole of her story:—"The weak and modest flowers that can bloom in a valley, are like to die, perhaps, if you transplant them too near to the skies—to the regions where storms gather or where the sun burns hot."

With two other and larger masterpieces of the novelist

I cannot forbear to connect "La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote." The two are "Eugénie Grandet" and "Illusions Perdues." Balzac wrought the first four years and the second six years after the tale we have just dealt with. "Eugénie Grandet," though a larger picture, is still a Dutch picture. It, too, is occupied with the intimate study of narrow fortunes; with the chronicle of the approach of private and inevitable trouble. In both, a woman—but the device is a favourite one of Balzac's—idealizes a relationship into which the commonplace must greatly enter. In both, a heart stirs somewhat restlessly in a confined cage, though a patience falls upon Eugénie Grandet such as Augustine never perhaps could have known.

"Illusions Perdues" repeats, but of course with modifications, the grouping of the two couples in "La Maison du Chat." In the later and larger, as in the smaller novel, there is the errant artistic person and his love—whoever that love may be—and there are the homely pair who can conduct a business, who can dispense with excitement. Perhaps it is not too much to say that in both tales the poetry of sentiment finds itself confronted by the poetry of conduct. But the poetry of Lebas's conduct was somewhat prosaic after all; and, when the gratification of her first fancy was exhausted, Virginie was bound to Lebas by hardly any tie, I suppose, but the tie of a common interest. Again, as one has pity for Augustine's disappointments, one must make some allowance for De Sommervieux's urgent need for the slaking of his thirst. For Lucien de Rubempré, the literary person—the artistic nature, to change the term—in "Illusions

Perdues," there is scarcely a word to be said ; while Ève and David, on the other hand—Lucien's sister and the man who was her lover and husband at Angoulême—stand as the finest or most sympathetic types that Balzac has created of those whose quietude of life and character forbid any brilliance of service. Their path of duty, at least, is not inevitably and continuously dull. For Ève and David—though hardly for Lebas and Virginie—there are

> "Sensations sweet,
> Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart."

And these things pass into their purer minds, "with tranquil restoration."

CHAPTER III.

FRIENDSHIPS.

WE are now at the beginning of the long series of years during which Balzac worked with an activity which threatened to be overwhelming. Energy he claims for himself, in writing to one of his friends, as the very chiefest of his characteristics. Balzac dealt willingly in superlatives, and at another moment he would have said that what singled him out from most men was ambition, or that the need to be loved and to be humoured was the very key-note of his temperament. But at all events his energy was really immense: for nearly a score of years the pertinacity of his labour suffered no check. Again, nothing is more remarkable than the dissimilar natures of the tasks to which he addressed himself. His imagination could be concerned almost at the same instant with "Les Chouans," and "La Physiologie du Mariage," and "La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote." Furthermore, he withdrew to the country to labour, as other men withdraw to it to rest; yet in the city he was as busy as a journalist who works during half the night. He, too, had his vigils—quite early he formed the habit of placing himself at his desk

when others' heads were on the pillow. Undoubtedly something of his excess of application is to be set down to the continual existence of debts, all of which can hardly have been caused by disastrous undertakings in business or by pure speculation. Balzac was honest and proud: he was careful, more than once, to satisfy creditors whose claims the Law did not recognize. Yet it is not only to the admirable anxiety to owe no man anything that we must attribute what became the method of his life. He loved to be free from obligation, but he loved likewise to be free with riches. Money was pleasant to him when it came into his hands. The knowledge that he was working for it was also pleasant.

Balzac had, then, the energy, though certainly not the system, of a strong man of business, coupled with that energy of an artist which concentrates itself only upon securing, if that may be, perfection to the work that is to be done. Hence, when publishers worried him for manuscripts, he sometimes refused to give them up, and, at other times, insisted upon proof following proof, that he might, practically, before publication, re-write a whole story. He worked like a slave, but this slave had always a conscience—nay, more, he had always an ideal.

With all his reading, all his observing, all his making of books, Balzac found time to be a good letter-writer—good if, in correspondence, the proof of goodness is that the thing shall be interesting. Judged by conventional standards, Balzac's epistles fall short. They are often fragmentary. They are almost invariably egotistic. They are anything but eloquent disquisitions on themes of Literature, Politics, or Painting. They are the affec-

tionate record of the reality of his friendships and the chronicle of his struggle with his work.

For friendship Balzac had a genius rare even in his own country, in which, from the Eighteenth Century to this day, an association at once so voluntary and so varied, has always been properly esteemed. Not only the cordiality of his temperament, but the many-sidedness of his mind, found satisfaction in prolonged and profound intimacies with women and men. He had a high ideal, beyond all doubt, in this matter, and he generally acted up to it. For him the basis of friendship was bound to be a sound one: intellectual sympathies and the instinctive liking. He had a deep indifference to the mere "*amitiés d'épiderme.*" What he sought for, and obtained, was "the intimacy of the heart."

In the letters which disclose the depth and constancy of Balzac's friendship, there is found, not unnaturally, much of the best material for a knowledge of his life and character. For the most part these letters are written to women. That can be accounted for in two ways. The first cause lies upon the surface—while his friends among men were, with hardly an exception, inhabitants of Paris, his friends among women resided chiefly in remote country houses. Men in Paris, men in the world in which he actually lived, knew quite well what he was about. The intelligent *châtelaine*, shut up in the heart of Le Blaisois or Le Berri, with her music and her books, found in the reception of letters a personal interest which the advent of the Gazette could not rouse. But another and a deeper reason lies in Balzac's individuality. To his nature it was essential that people less busy than he was

—people whose minds were at leisure for the concerns of another—should interest themselves in all the details of his affairs, and should receive his confidences with patience and sympathy. His peculiar organization—the organization of an artist, which, whatever it must have of persistent and energetic, must have also in abundance the qualities of refinement and subtlety—claimed, most of all, the delicate ministrations of the friendship of women. He received much from women. He owed them much in return. They got from him the boon of contact with a great temperament, and such a true, if hurried, sympathy with their aims, their fortunes, and their daily ways, as only a many-sided nature—a nature dramatic and imaginative—is able to afford.

Victor Hugo, De Stendhal, Théophile Gautier, Charles Nodier, and Charles de Bernard, were the chief of those illustrious contemporaries of his own sex with whom Balzac's relations were cordial. The author of "Nôtre Dame de Paris" was "*mon cher Hugo*" when he was not "dear and illustrious master." Nodier is "my good Nodier." Charles de Bernard, who is written to, perhaps, at somewhat greater length than the rest—and for whose wife Balzac has the friendliest of nicknames, derived from one of his own novels—is invited, not, of course, early in Balzac's life, to come out to Balzac's suburban place, to arrange the books: nor is the inducement of remuneration withheld from him—"You shall have fifty sous a day, and your wine." Among women-writers, Madame Emile de Girardin—the possessor of what the French call "an amiable talent"—was one of Balzac's friends. He genuinely respected her; though they were

sometimes separated by his contempt for the purely commercial nature of her husband. And, though he does not seem to have ever been particularly intimate with Madame George Sand, he felt, when some other person failed to understand his circumstances, that Madame Sand would not have failed to understand them. She knew no small rivalries, he said. In her he recognized a great, though erratic, heart, as well as a deep intelligence.

An element of protection, which Frenchmen love—and which, in many lands, very young men love—entered into one at least of Balzac's friendships with women. Madame de Berny, who was probably a little older than he was, and who was a friend of all his family, did something more than counsel and confer with him. Once (it was in 1828), by stepping into the breach at the necessary moment, she saved him from the worst effects of financial disaster. She helped him to help himself. He felt he had a right to accept her aid; and it was a service which he never forgot. Later on, in another money trouble, when Madame de Berny was dead, he wrote to a person who had known her, "That first time, I had an angel at my side."

Whatever may have been the precise attitude of Madame de Berny towards Balzac, the influence of his friendship with her was perhaps the most potent influence exercised by any friendship on his life. To his own mind, at least, it seemed so, when he was bewailing her loss. Yet he bewailed it without a knowledge of his future; and our view must be broader than any he could take at a time when the woman who was at last to be his

wife was still unknown to him. There were other associations, besides. But, in any case, Madame de Berny counted for much. "In my greatest troubles she sustained me, by word and deed of devotion." Again, "That which she only roughly modelled in me, I work now to complete." And yet again, "Madame de Mortsauf, in the 'Lys dans la Vallée,' expresses but weakly the least of that person's qualities." [1]

Though the two fat volumes of Balzac's Correspondence contain several allusions to Madame de Berny—who died in 1836, after an illness of a couple of years—there is not, from beginning to end of them, one line that was actually addressed to her. Of the letters written to Madame Zulma Carraud, on the other hand, many have been preserved, and many published, and they tell, as well as any, the story of Balzac's daily life. Madame Carraud had been the great girl-friend of Balzac's sister. Into his intimacy with her, prolonged as it was, the romantic never entered; but Balzac had the highest opinion of her abilities, and consulted her constantly with reference to his work. This friendship, wholly sane and beneficent, was to Balzac an immense service and an immense rest. Thanks to it, he got a sensible woman's impartial and qualified counsels. Thanks to it, the quiet sojourns that he made repeatedly at Angoulême and at Frapesles—in the semi-southern

[1] It has, of course, been suggested that in Madame de Mortsauf the admirable points of Madame de Berny are "expressed" anything but "weakly"; and, further, that Monsieur de Berny bore some resemblance to Monsieur de Mortsauf. If the latter conjecture be true, policy, rather than feeling, must have dictated the dedication to Monsieur de Berny of the story of "Madame Firmiani."

town in which "le Commandant" worked, and in the solitude of Le Berri, where Madame Carraud had a small estate—resulted in the accomplishment of some of the best of his labours.

One other intimacy—that with the Duchesse de Castries—has to be specially mentioned—has to be remembered with care—and we shall have completed the record of those friendships with women which Balzac formed before the years of his closest connection with the person he was at last to marry. For his association with the Duchesse d'Abrantès—beginning at the time when Balzac's family and this illustrious relic of the Empire were settled near to each other at Villeparisis—was at most an association between a man who was becoming important in Literature and a woman who had not ceased to be important in Society. It gave to both a certain obvious, but, so to say, external and superficial advantage. Moreover, the Duchesse d'Abrantès was herself a writer—for Balzac in some sense a comrade. And, as regards the always anonymous "Louise"—to whom Balzac said many pretty things on note-paper, and to whom, at a given moment, he was minded to dedicate one of his stories—Balzac never saw her. She declared her admiration in a letter, and many letters followed the first. She had, perhaps, that claim upon an author's regard which arises from the sympathetic understanding of his work. But there at all events the matter ended. No personal magnetism drew them together.

Balzac's intimacy with the Duchesse de Castries was of quite another kind; and something of that which is

called his "cynicism," is to be attributed to the dance she led him. An austere judgment condemns the Duchesse de Castries, and declines to sympathize with Balzac. I prefer to sympathize with Balzac, and not to condemn the Duchesse de Castries.

To Aix, in 1832—and beyond Aix, on the road to Italy, following in her track—Balzac was drawn by this siren of the Lac du Bourget, this magnetic nature, this Eustacia Vye of the great world. He came, he writes to Madame Carraud—the friend who was like a sister to him—he "came to seek little and to seek much: much, because I am seeing a woman who is gracious and lovable; little, because I shall never be loved by her." In her there was in reality—there can hardly be a doubt of it—a thin stratum of friendship for him. She cared for Balzac slightly, it seemed, at last; but he cared for her a great deal. At Aix-les-Bains, for a month, he lived in her society, save in the hours he resolutely gave to some of the most excellent of his work. And when she set out upon her travels, with her kinsman the Duc de FitzJames—whom Balzac liked—and all his family, the young writer of novels planned to go with them. But, at Geneva, somehow, in some inexplicable way—after the fashion of these things—it was all over. The two parted. Without absolute rupture, their relations were less cordial. The fire of their friendship had quite gone out.

> "Ah, Love, but a day
> And the world has changed!"

—must have been Balzac's thought. What he said, long

afterwards, was that the matter had been to him "*un des plus grands chagrins de ma vie.*" And no doubt it had. Yet the society of the lady, and her gracious presence, had given him enjoyment, too. And, to the artist, enjoyment is so much of inspiration.[1]

[1] Philarète Chasles, who was a frequenter of her salon, describes the Duchesse de Castries in his "Mémoires," with surroundings and a pose that seem to me to recall very nearly, in their antique simplicity, David's portrait of Madame Récamier. But, in considering her physically, account must be taken, Monsieur Gabriel Ferry assures us, of an expression "*de souffrance voilée*," of a "*tête demeurée belle*," and of a "*splendide chevelure vénitienne.*"

CHAPTER IV.

THE "PEAU DE CHAGRIN."

THE publication of the "Peau de Chagrin" and the composition of "Le Curé de Tours" and of "Le Médecin de Campagne" date from about the time of which I have last been speaking. The success of the "Peau de Chagrin" was very marked, and it was made not only among the literary. This is not difficult to account for. A conception, almost as certainly striking as that of Mr. Stevenson in "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," was realized in the "Peau de Chagrin" with depth beyond depth of completeness—with picturesqueness, with unflagging persistence, with curious unity of touch. No doubt the thoroughness of realization was, in this case, and in many others, due in great measure to Balzac's method of work; but then the method of work was itself the consequence of the ardent, artistic nature, which, in presence of a task to be performed, labours not like a craftsman, but charges like a soldier.

When Balzac was writing a story, his life consisted of a little sleep, a little feeding, and a prodigious exercise of brain and pen. He lived, day by day, and night

by night, with the beings he had made. For him their existence was not relative, but absolute. Thus it is told of him that he would break in on his sister, with the information, "I am starting for Grenoble. Monsieur Benassis lives there." Or, again, "Do you know that Félix de Vandenesse is going to be married? And to one of the Grandvilles, too! It's an excellent match." Once, amongst the readers of "Ursule Mirouët," there was a certain amount of curiosity as to the Past of a friend of Dr. Minoret's—Captain de Jordy. It would seem to have been unhappy. For the Captain was "*le type de gentilhomme pauvre et résigné*"—"*son âme devait être le foyer de chagrins secrets.*" It was agreed that an inquiry should be made of Balzac on the subject. The novelist listened to the question with the utmost seriousness. He meditated—paused before he answered—turned over his memories. But alas! there was nothing to reveal. "I did not know Captain de Jordy," he said, briskly, "until he came to Nemours."

The story may be capped by one more anecdote, in which Balzac's brother-writer, Jules Sandeau, has a part. Sandeau, on coming home from a journey, called on Balzac, and spoke of the health of his sister. "Yes," said Jules Sandeau, after talking in some detail of the matter; "my sister has indeed been ill!" "I am sorry," answered Balzac—who had listened as politely as might be, though somewhat absently. Then, in a changed voice, "We must come back to real life, however. Consider Eugénie Grandet!"[1]

[1] Mr. Power Hicks—to whom I owe so much—recalls to me that when, in "La Vieille Fille," Balzac wants to remind us what great

I do not know that the "Peau de Chagrin" displays this intensity of belief in the created character and the inevitable incident more markedly than many another of Balzac's stories; but it is at least a novel which gains peculiarly by the common characteristic. Without it, how could we be invited to accept—what we do accept almost unquestioningly—the play of the supernatural over the events of the tale? The "Peau de Chagrin" is an allegory. Its hero becomes possessed of, and he must needs carry along with him in all his journeyings, a certain skin, which shrinks, sometimes in a lesser, sometimes in a greater degree, as the hero forms, or gives utterance to, the wish of his heart. When it has shrunk to nothing the hero's days will be over. It is not easy to express in a sentence what is the lesson of this parable; but it makes of course for the subordination of the rebellious instinct, for the submission of the individual fancy to the forces which govern the world. Human Nature, in the person of the "Peau de Chagrin's" Raphael, takes exception to the decree—asks, whether by hook or crook, the wanted object may not be secured and the payment of the price eluded. No. The skin gets smaller and smaller, and Raphael's days become less. Wonderfully dramatic is his gradually increasing realization of the nearness of his end. Every means are tried to save him. Things and persons dear to him have had to be abandoned. What will the mountains at

results small accidents may bring about, he has recourse to "Eugénie Grandet" and to "L'Histoire des Treize" for his illustrations, just as naturally as to the accounts of Blucher at Waterloo and of Kellermann at Marengo.

Mont Dore do?—and what the waters of Aix? Nothing whatever that can be counted upon. The skin shrinks relentlessly. At last there is a moment of forgetfulness, or a moment of defiance. And the thing is all over when Raphael, whom Fœdora could only have betrayed, re-possesses, for an instant, Pauline—Pauline, the incarnation of an exquisite, of an unselfish, but yet of a sterile devotion.

Among the "Études Philosophiques," the "Peau de Chagrin" will continue to take the first place, both in the appreciation of the general public and in that of the more particular student of the literary Art. The allegory is impressive, and it is presented with dexterity and vividness. The mysticism of Balzac, difficult to follow in "Séraphita," is, in the "Peau de Chagrin," such as all the world can receive with sympathy. In a book confined within the limits proper to this "Great Writers" Series, it will be well to say as little as possible about the "philosophical" stories. They are the result of a bold imagination—of intuition besides—and of a mass of reading; but, as studies of Humanity's fortunes, as "*magasins de documents sur la nature humaine*," they are not the most satisfactory portion of the mature work of Balzac. They advance many theories, and very ingeniously—as in "Louis Lambert"—yet sometimes do but insufficiently support them; so that the reader, in considering the story, is apt to wish for one thing out of two—either a philosophy less romantic or a romance less philosophical. Monsieur Taine says—and he puts his own point of view clearly enough, at all events—that "*tout philosophe renferme un sceptique*," and that Balzac

was not a sceptic—was no more a sceptic by nature than by trade. "Both nature and profession," Monsieur Taine adds, truthfully, "oblige him to imagine and to believe; for the observation of a novelist must often be a power of divination. He does not examine sentiments, as an anatomist examines tissues. From physiognomy and gesture he conjectures and concludes. . . . His instrument is intuition—a dangerous faculty, yet a high one—by which a man discovers from an isolated incident the procession of incidents which have produced it, or which it is about to produce."

"*Tout philosophe renferme un sceptique*"—yet Monsieur Taine's dictum cannot be universally accepted; and, whatever may be its difficulty and whatever its fancifulness, "Séraphita" is itself a contradiction of the statement. Here, in "Séraphita," is a philosophy which has no room for scepticism. And here, too, is a book which —with all its faults—is at least an illustrious instance of the capacity for spiritual thought: from end to end of it it is a rarefied atmosphere that the writer is breathing. What the book illustrates or urges, with something of Swedenborgian method, is the force that might belong to Faith, were but Faith unbounded: the identification of the will of the creature with that of the Creator being so complete that the creature is at one with the forces that govern the world. They are upon his side.

But we come back to the "Peau de Chagrin," a part of whose value lies where much of the charm of Balzac's work is wont to lie—in the wisdom and the thoughtfulness of the interpolated, or at least of the single, sentence—the sentence which, with scarcely a loss, can

be detached for quotation. What a capacity for pointed or profound reflection! What a judgment upon Life is here! Here, too, is Balzac's manner of writing found at its most successful, if, in manner, the proof of success is to present your matter forcibly, to discover and to preserve the tones that will be listened to. "*Vierges du fait*," says Balzac, "*nous étions hardis en paroles.*" I cannot translate that—there is the figure as well as the terseness. "A great man, strong in health, is bound to be pleasure-loving." "He remembered suddenly that the possession of power, however immense, is nothing if it is not accompanied by the knowledge of how to use it. The sceptre is a toy for the child, an axe for Richelieu, and for Napoleon a lever by which the world can be moved." "To bring chaos into a young man's life, it is enough that he shall meet a woman who does not love him—or a woman who loves him too much." Again, "There are some thoughts which women never face. Why is it? Is it strength of love or want of courage?" The "Peau de Chagrin" has its wildnesses, its exaggerations. It has its mistakes. But, in its every epigram, some measure of truth is encrusted and preserved. Facts are held more closely, seen more finely, when enclosed in the casket of the best of Balzac's style.

Public acceptance of the "Peau de Chagrin"—due to some extent to the introduction of the supernatural in so dexterous a way and with so tragic a purpose—was no doubt facilitated by the range the novel displayed, by its heights and depths, by the suddenness and the completeness of its contrasts. The book, which contains a sympathetic description of an interior that has about it

the chastened homeliness and pious simplicity of a picture of Chardin, holds also the narrative of an orgy which only the Decadence in Rome could have matched. Raphael, in contact with Pauline, has the delicacy to accept a sacrifice which has been delicately offered,—I am thinking of the exquisite little scene in which her breakfast of to-morrow furnishes, and is bound to furnish, his supper of to-night. Yet Raphael experiences, as surely, Fœdora's fatal fascination, and is half a slave to her, while knowing her heartless. And, in this same volume, Balzac has imaged Aquilina and Euphrasie: one of them "the soul of vice;" the other, "vice without a soul."

The "Peau de Chagrin" is not to be recommended to be covered prettily in calf, and offered as a school-prize to the very young. But the variety of power it discloses; its reflections, its criticism of Life; its scenes, now of audacity and turbulence, and now of simplicity and restraint—these things, with the spirit of the book, with the essential fineness of its allegory, secure for it a place which will at all events be lasting. I am not sure whether the particular way in which it treats of occult matters, commends it, or does not commend it, in England and America, just now, to a generation in which the superior person is not unwilling to accept the Supernatural, provided only that the manifestation of the Supernatural be ugly and that it cannot possibly be beneficent.

CHAPTER V.

THE "MÉDECIN" AND THE "CURÉ."

THE success of the "Peau de Chagrin" assured Balzac that now his chance had come. He had grasped a large public—and by means more creditable than those employed in the "Physiologie du Mariage." Whatever might be said by the smaller of the reviewers, his comrades in Literature were now with him. Forthwith we may behold him planning that to the ample banquet of his Fiction a still larger public should be compelled to come in. The "Peau de Chagrin," by its subject, by something even of its sentiment, was not for everybody. Let there be prepared a novel which should be for the youth as well as for the man, for the simple as well as for the subtle, for *ingénue* as well as matron. Balzac made no concessions in his art. He never angled for popularity either by advocating what he could not believe in, or by suppressing the opinions he had formed. He was glad, however, when the happy inspiration of "Le Médecin de Campagne" led him, as he thought, into an acceptable way. The country doctor's "Confession,"—a long narrative which makes perhaps the most dramatic chapter of the book—does indeed touch upon matters with which

the suckling is not generally concerned, and which the pure in conduct, if she be pure in heart, may hear of but to mourn. Yet as a whole the work deserves the eulogy which Balzac himself pronounced upon it, knowing it so well both as creator and critic. How he had paused over it!—how, after having written, he had weighed its every word! "I can die happy," he said—"I have done one beautiful thing. The book is worth as much as a law made and kept, or as a battle gained." "*C'est l'Évangile en action!*"—he wrote of it in admiration. And the very spirit of Christianity—its tenderness and its beneficence—is certainly exhaled from the "Médecin de Campagne's" pages.

Technically, we may take it, the "Médecin de Campagne" is no more faultless than are the majority of Balzac's books. At the very least it may be said that an age more leisurely than ours is needed for the full appreciation of the endless disquisition upon farm and industry, the district's needs, the district's late improvements, which occupies so much of the earlier chapters, and which, to the unvaliant reader, bars entrance to the heart of the story. The earlier chapters of the "Médecin de Campagne" are indeed a solid task. Yet the method has its merits as well as its disadvantages. How completely—little stone by stone—is there built up the effect which Balzac wanted to produce! He transports you from your study, in London or in Paris, to the mountain country that surrounds and hangs over Grenoble. And when, at the end of the three hundred pages, "le bon Monsieur Benassis" dies, and, in the sympathetic presence of a whole country-side, there is

put into the ground the district's benefactor, and everybody's friend, you have been made to believe in his existence so much that it is a personal loss that you suffer. You have known Monsieur Benassis, as you have known Mr. Peggotty, Doctor Manette, and Colonel Newcome.

And to know Monsieur Benassis absolutely, as the book allows you to do, is to take, one would suppose, a kinder view of his creator's temperament and intimate thought than has been taken by more than one of those authorities who have uttered judgment upon them. Perhaps, after all, neither Mr. Henry James nor Monsieur Taine—to name no others—has been sufficiently alive to the humane and the poetic sides of Balzac's work. The merely unmoved analyst, however finely accurate his tests—the merely unflinching dissector, however great his anatomical knowledge, and however sharpened and precise his instruments—is not, in Literature, the final judge of substance or subject. Mr. James and Monsieur Taine have both of them, in their essays, done considerable service: Balzac's works have prompted them to the expression of many interesting thoughts, and of much cogent criticism. But if Mr. James finds that Balzac's highest success was reached in a minute analysis of smallest things, and Monsieur Taine holds that his greatest characteristic is that he is a Record Office filled with archives—documents, the implication is, which somehow have not yet been wrought into the final form of History or of Art—one is free to consider that, in making the estimate, personal prepossessions have not been left out of the matter.

These writers do not wholly deny, but it is true to

say that they minimise, Balzac's humanity, his geniality, his appreciation of goodness and beauty. Mr. James at least does. And his views, of course, it is not difficult to support, by citation of the unnumbered troop of sinners and good-for-nothings, of sharks and harpies, of sensualists and egotists, that throngs along the least agreeable of the novelist's pages. But, in the Arts, cynicism is not to be proved by the presentation of the morbid—an abundance of ugliness is no evidence of the lack of an interest in beauty. Sainte-Beuve, himself—who, notwithstanding some personal provocation, makes the charge far less unhesitatingly and broadly than several later critics—for once "forces the note," and is, by implication, a little uncandid, when he calls up, as a reproach to Balzac, this utterance from Bettina to the mother of Goethe: "The work of Art should express that only which lifts the soul, which gladdens it nobly." Even the art of Music knows the value of discords; as the art of Painting the value of shadow. You hear the discords in Balzac, and you see the shadow; but you find also the harmony, and you find the light. To have produced the character of Monsieur Benassis—no sentimental philanthropist, but a practical and watchful benefactor, looming real and large on a great and durable canvas—would have entitled Balzac to take exception to the charge of cynicism, to the charge of succeeding best when glorifying the hideous or penetrating into the heart of the small.

Was Benassis a failure? Did this sinner over whose repentance there was joy in heaven, find, even in his service—not to speak of the amendment of his nature—

no reward for years of unfatigued well-doing? Benassis —who left professions of piety to others, and prayed the hardest when he worked the most—was himself the rejoicing witness of the changes for the better in the country-side to whose interests his later life was a devotion. The seed of his sowing had fallen not indeed on stony ground. He was himself the spectator of the harvest. The well-being of a whole population, and a whole district's power of self-reliance and righteous self-sufficiency, his efforts had secured; and a gratitude deeper than the lips remained behind when the country doctor's task was ended, and, in large letters, roughly cut into the pine-wood cross which rose over his grave, there ran the legend, "the good Monsieur Benassis." Genestas, an honourable soldier, looking at the epitaph, thought that it was the Curé who had invented the simplicity of the phrase. "No," answered the priest, "we have but used the words which have been uttered everywhere, between these mountain-tops and Grenoble."

I could understand that the passionate remorse of Monsieur Benassis's "Confession," and the splendid abnegation and untiring service of all his later years, should be less impressive to Mr. James, as an artist, than the dainty perfection of "Le Curé de Tours." This particular preference, Mr. James, indeed, has never, that I know of, had occasion to express; but for "Le Curé de Tours" he has declared, in brief terms, an unstinted, and certainly a justified, admiration. "Le Curé de Tours" was written at the De Bernys', at Saint-Firmin, in the Oise, when Balzac's Paris dwelling was in the Rue Cassini: some time after movement from the Rue de Tour-

non. A sense of entire and successful concentration, a sense of that order of strength which is best amassed or best displayed in quietude, is over the "Curé de Tours" from its beginning to its end. The subject is not vast, and the canvas selected for its record is of an appropriate size. In a hundred pages, the character and fortunes of the Curé are chronicled with completeness and delicacy —with a success as unquestioned as that which Balzac more than once obtained in the "short story" proper: in the "Grenadière," for instance, which was the result of the intense yet happy labour of one single day: in "La Messe de l'Athée," again, in which with few and finished words a striking conception was expressed in unforgettable fashion.

The very first sentence of "Le Curé de Tours" is a proof of how well the craftsman knew by this time his craft. "In the beginning of the autumn of the year 1826, the principal person in this history—the Abbé Birotteau—on his way home from the house at which he had been spending the evening, was surprised by a shower." There is not a trace of superfluous ornament —that is, where any ornament would be superfluous, there is no trace of ornament at all—but in lines simple and direct, by words that are ordinary, the principal personage is brought at once upon the scene; the time is indicated, and something of Birotteau's status and office; and, in the event recorded, there is at once a suggestion of the narrow limits within which moved the regular provincial life: "On his way home from the house at which he had been spending the evening, *he was surprised by a shower.*" The sentence strikes the

key-note. It is never lost sight of. The Abbé Birotteau and his small discomforts are in our minds to the end. From the first line to the last, there is preserved the Dutch method of minute observation, of precise record. In its quietness and harmony the canvas covered is as if Metsu had worked upon it. And yet, as we shall see, this daintiness of touch is at the service of a singular boldness of conception. When we have closed the page we feel that in its portrayal of a bad priest's hatred, the "Curé de Tours" is comparable only with Mr. Browning's "Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister."

The bad priest—of course he is not the Abbé Birotteau. When did "a shower" seriously disturb badness?—be an event in any wicked life? Little things like that, upset only the excellent—disturb the incapable. The Abbé Birotteau was blameless, limited, short, ordinary, and a prey to the rheumatics. The bad priest was the Abbé Troubert; and he died Bishop of Troyes.

The scene of the story, as the title suggests, is Balzac's native city—at Tours and its transpontine suburb, Saint-Symphorien, the little drama is played out. Much of it passes under the very shadow of the cathedral in which Birotteau served. Only late does the action shift to a Loire-side country-house, and to Saint-Symphorien—and, for Birotteau, Saint-Symphorien is banishment.

Never has the daily life, and the private hope and apprehension, of a blameless priest, loveable yet not very full of character, conscientious but not intellectual, been more minutely pictured. The Abbé, of an evening, frequents the modest whist-table of a well-placed family. He goes to Madame de Listomère's. He was introduced

to her by his dead friend, Chapeloud—an ecclesiastic more learned than himself, and with a readier social charm, and with a mind wide enough to understand that Birotteau could be quite genuinely attached to him, and yet could, in the future, when he should be gone, derive a substantial measure of comfort from the possession of the library and the furniture of one who was no more. At the same hour, every afternoon, the two priests—confidants as well as comrades—had been accustomed to walk upon "le Mail"—the tree-planted promenade that marks the boundaries of the older town —and now l'Abbé Birotteau's walks were solitary, but he lodged at Mademoiselle Gamard's, in the selected rooms which had been tenanted by his departed friend; and his circle, wishing him well, had assured him that a vacant canonry—to which his ambition before had scarcely soared—would fall to his lot.

Birotteau then, at the beginning of the story—save for the shower which surprised him, which gave him wet feet, and more than a touch of rheumatism—Birotteau was a good man in clover. Alas! the story has to be the record of the steps which led him from small annoyances to a great defeat. Coming in from Madame de Listomère's that rainy evening, he was kept waiting at the door. It was the first symptom of an antagonistic spirit, compassing his discomfort, in the house. That lesser culprit, the servant, had been instigated by her mistress, and Mademoiselle Gamard had been instigated by the bad priest, Troubert, who, turning to base uses the *savoir-vivre* which is the great possession of the ecclesiastic who succeeds, had brought vividly to

Mademoiselle Gamard's mind every small grievance of which Birotteau might have been the innocent cause. Troubert was ambitious in the first place, but he was likewise jealous. In love affairs—in the relations of a man and woman—jealousy is the sign of the victory of the animal nature over the intellectual and the spiritual parts. But a priest's jealousy—a priest's envy, rather—though it no less degrades his character, may conceivably, instead of retarding, actually forward his career. Jealousy, in the priest, is not fairly to be described as the most unremunerative of all possible crimes. L'Abbé Troubert employed it well. It supplied a stimulus to his ambition, and he never indulged it too much, or forgot for a moment that it was his servant and not his master. Embroiling the harmless Birotteau with a narrow-souled landlady—making it difficult, and at last impossible, for the poor priest to remain with her—Troubert was instrumental in depriving the Abbé of the books and furniture he loved. In high places of the Church and of the State, Troubert's influence waxed greater. As the story proceeds, Birotteau is the sinking, Troubert, the swiftly-rising, man. A masterly diplomatic action—threatening the advance of their family—forbids the Listomères any longer to be substantially the Abbé's helpers; and by a further intrigue, the bad priest succeeds in getting his most innocent enemy brought from the Cathedral and appointed to the outlying parish beyond the Loire. Birotteau is in broken health. He will gaze at Tours longingly from across the river; but he will never again walk in it. His humble recreations, his whist,

his blameless gossip, are in the Past for ever. And, wrecked and inert, he is stationed, passively, on the terrace, overlooking the Loire, when, at the story's end, Hyacinthe Troubert—now nominated Bishop of Troyes—rolls grandly along the quay of Saint-Symphorien, happy in satisfied ambition, on his road to Paris.

Three years after Balzac had drawn, with his most careful and most delicate art, the portrait of l'Abbé Birotteau, in "Le Curé de Tours," he reverted, briefly, in "Le Lys dans la Vallée," to this earlier and quite complete creation. He used l'Abbé Birotteau again: he made him the confessor of Madame de Mortsauf—the heroine of a tale which is a little sentimental, and a little morbid, but which by reason of its thought and reverie, retains its share of charm. But in "Le Lys dans la Vallée," the good dull priest of the "Curé de Tours" plays but a very minor part. Only towards the end of her life did Henriette de Mortsauf need to accord him her confidence. His predecessor, with this much-tried *châtelaine*, had been the Abbé de la Berge: a man, we read, "of apostolic force;" fit, no doubt, to be the upholder of her difficult virtue. Birotteau, milder and more docile, yet made his influence felt. On her death-bed, at all events, he was able to persuade Madame de Mortsauf of "*le néant des choses humaines.*"

And, if any reader of "Le Curé de Tours" happens to be impressed unduly by the extent to which this excellent Abbé appreciated his own small comforts, and was disturbed by the machinations of his enemies, let it be remembered that yet another book may be called as a witness to character. In "César Birotteau"—the

novel in which Balzac displayed so profound a knowledge of all questions in Bankruptcy—there is record of our Abbé's sending to his brother the whole of his little savings, and with them a letter conceived in simplicity and penned with affection. Yet of these various testimonies there can hardly be need; for, though "Le Curé de Tours" contains no story of Birotteau's willing abnegation, and not a single sentence that he frames with cleverness or pronounces with point, it is somehow borne home to one, through the writer's subtle and indefinable art, that it would have been a pleasant thing to take one's walk daily with l'Abbé Birotteau upon "le Mail" at Tours: that one would have been a little happier—perhaps even a little better—for his presence.

And, as somehow upon the canvas, by touches almost imperceptible, by an art that is elusive, the character takes shape and colour, and a real man stands beside you, so is the appropriate background for this figure of the Abbé, wrought gradually and wrought with success. Touraine, which Balzac describes often—which he describes quite exquisitely in "La Grenadière"—Touraine, with its broad river, its suave hill-sides, the tepid air of its golden autumns, is described likewise, and described well, in "Le Lys dans la Vallée. But Tours itself is best described in "Le Curé." Tours did not appreciate Balzac—who was the greatest of its sons—and Balzac loved it, and blamed it. Love and knowledge, and only a word of blame—"Tours, one of the least literary of cities," if I may repeat the expression—go together in the picture of the place which the story I have been discussing provides. The precincts of the cathedral—"*la petite Place*

déserte," and Birotteau's dwelling, and the Rue de la Psalette—are studied, and remembered with a particular felicity, and the Past is summoned to bestow the charm of association upon the vivid and the learned sketch. Méryon, in some incomparable etching—putting other artists to shame, for their lack of imagination—could have done the thing no better. The house of Mademoiselle Gamard—the lodging of Birotteau—"is found continually in the shadows thrown by that great cathedral, over which Time has cast its sombre mantle; on which it has graven its ineffaceable lines; on which, in the damp coldness, it has planted moss, and lichen, and straggling weed." Ingenious is the suggestion of uncertainty as to the house's age, and as to its fortunes. But look at the arabesques on its panels, and look at the door! The church's flying buttress has its base in the garden, and "an archæologist would perceive that the house has always been, so to say, a part of the magnificent edifice with which it is allied."

CHAPTER VI.

A MIDDLE PERIOD.

THE "Médecin de Campagne"—though it brought him, as he said it would, "many friends"—did not gain for Balzac the Prix Montyon, which he had almost counted on obtaining; and the quiet perfection of "Le Curé de Tours" passed, no doubt, comparatively unperceived. The years in which these fictions were produced —1832 and 1833—were two of the busiest of Balzac's life; and he is found complaining to his mother of a little unreasonableness, when she expects him to have the time, and, what is more, to have the energy, to plunge into a task of private and of business letter writing. It was in April, 1832, that "Le Curé de Tours" had been conceived, and meditated on, and finally executed, under the friendly eyes of Madame de Berny, whom death was soon to claim. "Madame de Berny," says Balzac to his mother, "saw what brain-work meant. It took me ten days merely to *plan* the 'Curé de Tours.'" And the "Curé de Tours," wrought, after all, under the happy inspiration of a protecting quietude, had been among the easiest and lightest of his labours. "Louis Lambert," with its philosophy or its speculation —with its ingenious anticipation of views, upon the Co-

relation of physical forces, propounded, in the next decade, by Sir William Grove—had cost him much that year. The "Contes Drolatiques"—in which he told broad stories, in a French which, to the not very learned, passes for the French of Rabelais, and even by the learned is admitted to be the most adroit and sufficient of imitations—the "Contes Drolatiques" were engaging him at the same time.

In 1833, the author's labours upon "Louis Lambert" were, as it were, forgotten; for they had been outdone. He liked the book still; he would always like it—so much of his own youth had been, so to say, caught and retained in it—had been fixed permanently in its pages. He had had great pleasure in getting a good copy finely bound for Madame Zulma Carraud, so often a hostess, and so continually a friend—though there had been a monstrous delay about the box to pack it in, and a little negligence on the part of "our good Borget," in sending it off.[1] But, as he was finishing the "Médecin de Campagne," he wrote of it—to Madame Carraud: "The 'Médecin de Campagne' exacts from me ten times the work I gave to 'Lambert.' There's not a phrase, not a thought, that hasn't been considered and re-considered, read, re-read, corrected—frightful! But if your aim is to approach the

[1] Balzac and Monsieur Auguste Borget had been brought together by Madame Carraud; and, in the Rue Cassini, Borget—who was a *genre* painter—took up his abode with Balzac. "A brotherly soul," wrote Balzac to the lady who had made them acquainted: "full of the delicacy I adore. I hope to be as much to him as he is to me." And two or three years later it was to this brotherly soul that was dedicated the story of a devoted service, never to be forgotten—"La Messe de l'Athée."

simple beauty of the Gospel, to surpass the 'Vicar of Wakefield,' to carry out in practical life the 'Imitation of Christ'—well! you must dig hard and deep." At last—it is dated from Paris, Saturday, May 25, 1833, —"the 'Médecin de Campagne' is finished. Fear nothing, with regard to it. The end is better than the beginning. The thing goes *crescendo*—until lately I had doubted whether it would." And then a line or two of quite domestic counsel:—"The Vichy water would probably be good for your dear child. But wait till you have tried change of air. And, above all, think about Magnetism!"

A month later, it was his sister who was Balzac's confidante:

"Yesterday I was at Baron Gérard's. He introduced to me three German families: one from Vienna, one from Frankfort, one from somewhere in Prussia. They told me that they had gone assiduously to Gérard's for a month, hoping to see me—they told me that the moment the French frontier is passed, I have actually some reputation. 'Persevere,' they added, 'and you will one day be the literary chief of Europe.' Of 'Europe,' sister! Flattering German families! How certain friends of mine would laugh if I told them this! Good Heavens, though!—they were excellent Germans, really. I allowed myself to think that they meant all that they said. We artists—praise agrees with us so well! These honest Germans put some courage into me. . . . I have resumed my life of work, and a great deal of black can be put upon white in twelve hours a day, little sister, and at the month's end—living like that—it is not a small task that has been done. Poor pen!—by rights you should be hard as the diamond!"

Again, in August, he wrote to Madame Carraud, at Angoulême — delighted with her appreciation of Madame de Berny. "You are right, dear friend, to

appreciate Madame de Berny. There is a striking likeness in your two minds—the same love of good; the same enlightened Liberalism; the same hopes for the masses; the same high thoughts, delicate feelings."

The reception given to the "Médecin de Campagne" was a blow to Balzac. Several times he speaks of it. Once, it is, "That failure of the 'Médecin' annoyed me." That it did not gain the Prix Montyon, was a small affair, apparently. What disquieted him most was the indifference of the world. And yet he tried to hide his disappointment, even from himself. "The three papers, on my own side, that have spoken of it, have done so with what really is contempt for book and author. The rest—I know nothing about them. It troubles me little." This is to Madame Zulma Carraud. "You are my real public: you and the better minds I want to please." And he adds that his own heart can only be opened to such as she—"to you and a few women to whom it has been given to understand troubles."

These extracts from his letters show Balzac now exalted, now depressed: charmed now with the quality of his work: and now disgusted at the public reception of it. If we think he complained too much, we must remember not alone his natural sensitiveness, but the character and the extent of the effort each book demanded from a temperament that was all of eagerness and fire. We must remember too, that he did not wear his heart upon his sleeve—that the letters I quote from are many of them completely private. And we may recollect, furthermore, that a book's comparative failure meant for its author something of poverty as well as

something of neglect. And plain living and a cottage among the hills—for Wordsworth the salvation of his nature and the making of his art—would have done nothing for Balzac, whose studies, in the main, were of the subtle and the civilized; whose world was the world of writer and diplomatist, of courtly ecclesiastic and of woman of Society; who said, emphatically, when, even by himself, his drifting into luxury was called into question, "*Il faut que l'artiste mène une vie splendide!*" The opinion may have been mistaken; but at all events it was sincere.

Debts, in these years—the middle years of his life—pressed upon Balzac. They had worried him before. They worried him almost to the end. And no wonder. For when a work of Art had been beheld and appreciated, he bought what he wanted, whether he could pay for it or no. And, while he was doubtless troublesome to publishers, there is no doubt also that publishers—at least one or two of them—were hard and unreasonable with him. This one complained of the delay in the delivery of the "Médecin," when Balzac was polishing it into what was intended for perfection. That one carried things so far that a lawsuit could not be stayed; and though the Court decided that Balzac on the whole was right, Balzac was scarcely in the end the gainer by the process. Thus one thing after another disturbed the writer, and distracted him—storms were about him, instead of the serene air of Art.

Nothing, however — neither debts, nor follies, nor private troubles—could succeed in long detaching him from the work he had set himself to do. And now its

scheme was a great, and, as time proceeded, it would become even a colossal one. The "Comédie Humaine," in all the extent of it, had not yet been planned; but Balzac was grouping together certain stories that became in reality a part of it: to Gosselin he announced, "the great work, 'Étude de Mœurs au Dix-neuvième Siècle.'" It was to contain Scenes from Private Life; from Life in the Capital; from Life in the Provinces. So much was written, and so much more was planned. Meanwhile accounts, now bad, now somewhat reassuring, came to him from the booksellers. One of the philosophical stories—"Louis Lambert"—had had in Germany ten times the circulation it had thus far enjoyed in France; but to Balzac came no direct profit whatever from this foreign sale. Prestige, no doubt, did something to console him. Then, it is proclaimed joyfully, and even with surprise, "The 'Médecin' is being reprinted." Already he was within sight of some reversal of the verdict which had been pronounced at first.

And so, with nothing less than his habitual energy, he threw himself into the labour necessary for "Eugénie Grandet." "I am revising 'Eugénie Grandet.'" And, before a public which, on the whole, appreciated him but little, had been able to annoy him by an undue exaltation of a single smallish masterpiece, Balzac had high hopes about its future. With the book he was correcting, a trump card lay in his hand, indeed. "*Je corrige 'Eugénie Grandet.' . . . 'Eugénie Grandet' vous étonnera.*"

CHAPTER VII.

"LE PÈRE GORIOT."

I OFFER no analysis of "Eugénie Grandet." The book is too well known for that to be necessary. And while, on the one hand, it can hardly claim particular notice as standing quite by itself, on the other hand it cannot always be advisable to select it as the representative of a class. It is a type, no doubt; and some of its qualities we have discerned elsewhere, already, and have, to sôme extent, dwelt upon. It is wrought with perfection; but, perhaps, by the themes which it avoids, as much almost as by the themes which it discusses, does it commend itself, not indeed to the literary artist, but to the lady in the dress circle. Yet Balzac has other books which, if she only knew it, that sometime arbitress of Literature in England might peruse with as little trepidation. Balzac himself would have recommended to her "Ursule Mirouët," which he dedicated to—which he almost wrote for—his nieces; very conscious at the time of how little fitted, for such as they, were his dark and melancholy studies of a life no phase of which he shrank from depicting. And in Pierrette Lorain—the heroine of "Pierrette"—Balzac is rightly credited with having painted an "adorable nature," "*toute de délicatesse et de*

spontanéité." Nor had Pauline, of the "Peau de Chagrin," any less than Eugénie Grandet, the divine capacity of abnegation.

But "Eugénie Grandet," though it exacts from one, now, no very serious discussion, does claim a further word. Apart from Eugénie's singular simplicity, and quiet goodness, and generous, unstinting devotion, there is great interest—there is the interest of a quickly felt reality—in the few characters whom alone Balzac has chosen to place here upon the stage. Madame Grandet, pious and obedient, but colourless and weak — only such a woman as Madame Grandet could by any possibility have lived to old age, with Grandet for a husband, or lived with Grandet at all. And—as the one servant who stays with him and is absorbed in his interests—"la grande Nanon" is just as inevitable. In her own dull, heavy, faithful, bovine way, she has for us the vitality of a *soubrette* of Molière. She lives, or vegetates, for all Time—remembered she must be, for her unfailing helpfulness, for the willingness of her submission, and for her physical immensity: the *dinornis* of Servitude. Grandet himself—imperious, steady of purpose; a slave-driver rather than a master, a husband, or a friend—is studied to the very depths. When he is remembered but as miser and millionaire, only a little has been understood of all that Balzac is ready to reveal in regard to him. Charles, the lover, is more ordinary. Notwithstanding his affection for his father, and his grief at his father's end, in the main he is the simply weak and selfish, elegant and empty, average young man of leisure. But would the pathos of the story have

been quite as deep, if Eugénie's devotion had been accorded to a being more substantial and more worthy? When Eugénie beheld Charles, she knew as much of men as did Miranda when she set eyes on Ferdinand. It was no Ferdinand, however, who descended into the streets of Saumur.

In the mere discovery of an ideal there may be something that is beautiful, and something that is touching. But the profounder pathos belongs, I must suppose, to the retaining of it, blindly or bravely, when reason would have dismissed it long ago. And Eugénie Grandet held it against all facts, against all truths. Not by the conception only, but by the frequent realization, of such a character, in the *ingénue* that he delights in—in the virginal soul—Balzac gives colour to the superstition that women are the idealists of the world. It is women, then, who have written its poems—who have led its Forlorn Hopes!

Balzac was soon to be busy on a work of more tremendous import, and of yet profounder penetration, than "Eugénie Grandet." In leaving that dainty, homely, idyll, for "Le Père Goriot," the minute and the exquisite were to give place to the monumental and the tragic. The "Lear" of the *bourgeoisie* was now to be written; and, in this newer "Lear," no Cordelia's tenderness was to relieve the gloom.

In a preface to a book not of his compiling—the "Répertoire de la Comédie Humaine," by Messieurs Cerfberr and Christophe, which to the student is quite as necessary a possession as Monsieur de Lovenjoul's "Histoire des Œuvres de H. de Balzac,"—Monsieur Paul

Bourget, has expressed, very happily, the common-sense opinion that more than half of Balzac's triumph in the portraiture of the soul, in the portraiture of Society, was due to divination, to an intellectual second sight. Philarète Chasles—I think it was—had said so before him. A "*voyant*" had been the word. Monsieur Bourget puts it strongly, of course, when—alluding to Balzac's continual literary busyness—he says, in round terms, "*Balzac n'a pas eu le temps de vivre.*" He is strictly accurate in adding that "the experience of this master of exact Literature was reduced to a minimum; but this minimum sufficed for him." "To the comparatively small number of *data* with which his observation had furnished him, he applied an analysis so intuitive that he discovered, behind the limited materials, the deep forces—the generative forces, if one may so call them."

Of course to do this, in some measure—to call the great out of the little: to divine much, where not much may be perceived or experienced—is ever the function of high novelist or dramatist—of the creative writer. But Balzac is an instance of such capacity to a very peculiar degree. In his treatment of love affairs no doubt divination counted. Yet Balzac, in his own person, knew something of Love—he had, at the least, come very near to it before he was middle-aged: long before it was Madame de Hanska who occupied him the most. He knew nothing of paternity: there was no personal experience of that relationship to fall back upon as a guide. Yet of all passions, the one which he has described with the very fullest power is that passion of paternal self-

sacrifice which made Père Goriot the creature, the slave, the ever-watchful and protecting genius of his child.

Few writers have been greater than Balzac in the exhibition of the moral qualities: no one has been more careful that they shall be presented with dignity, hedged in with honour, though the possessors of them need sometimes to be shown as of lives sordid and saddened, as of manners ungainly, of aspect almost repulsive. No fear, in any case, for the esteem in which we are to hold them. The flag is kept by Balzac spotless above the mire. Yet the width of Balzac's sympathy and the depth of his penetration must have made him, for his own part, as tolerant as he makes his Popinot in "L'Interdiction," which we read for the portrait of a just, keen judge, a man of practical charity, never tired of well-doing.

I have classed, by implication, among "moral qualities," le Père Goriot's devotion to his daughters. Yet I know that he carried it to excess. I know that in his case devotion o'erreached itself, and that it fell "o' the other side." For, when to sacrifice himself has become to le Père Goriot a thing of habit, we behold him, in his daughters' interests, the ardent helper of their intrigues. They have been badly used, in some sort: they must be assisted to their consolations: at all costs, they must be made happy. Of course, the thought is repulsive. But when did le Père Goriot move in guarded circles solely —hear only words of goodness and discretion? When did he have the privilege of profiting by the examples of a blameless life, in an ideal Society, or in a world of politic restraint? We must take him for what he is—an ill-

balanced, ill-educated soul, faulty, lovable: a lonely widower, in an obscure boarding-house, willingly stripping himself that the darlings of his heart may go in purple and fine linen. His surroundings have been base; the counsels of his companions, for all their outward respectability, dark and mean; his conceptions of Life —of some of its good things—were very limited, and must have been apt to be gross. He is ennobled, at all events, by the profundity of his affection.

The affection that le Père Goriot lavished was never in any sense returned. His daughters tolerated him. Scarcely even that. He was nothing but an unpresentable old man, who in his youth had made a fortune by astuteness and industry and successful dealings in vermicelli. He had educated his children—Anastasie and Delphine—and they had been enabled to contract marriages which were brilliant, instead of happy. He assisted Delphine in her loves, and Anastasie in her difficulties. It was not in either of them to dispense with his services, but they broke his heart by their neglect. Though both of them had been married in prosperity, they belonged to very different worlds. It was fitting that they should see each other but seldom; yet only accident prevented them from meeting at his death-bed —they might have quarrelled in his presence; they had done so before; and that had been one of his fears. At the last, it was impossible for Delphine to arrive. She fancied she was ill, and would not come. Then she would come, but must have money for her father; and Monsieur de Nucingen, her husband, must allow it her. He refused. She fainted. "*Mes filles, mes filles! Je*

veux les voir!" had to be called in vain. Delphine's maid-servant came instead; and, when le Père Goriot was no longer conscious, Anastasie burst into the garret with her tardy tears and the repentance of an hour. Ingratitude has its degrees.

The keeper of the boarding-house—to whom Père Goriot owed a trifle she was uncertain of receiving—grudged him the sheets in which to die. But Rastignac and the young Bianchon—Delphine's lover, and his friend, a student of medicine—saw that a certain decency was kept: that a certain consideration—which Humanity, even when it is penniless, may conceivably claim—was paid to the obscure failure, who was passing away. The last sounds that le Père Goriot uttered, the last expressions that stirred upon his face, were sounds, expressions, of grateful, even joyous, recognition of what he thought to be his daughter's presence. The signs came from out of the depths—from out of the depths of his being. A day or two later the empty carriages of le Père Goriot's sons-in-law followed, in state and chilly ceremony, the humble hearse which bore him to his grave. The loving-kindness of the family that he had made, extended even so far as that.

There should be pointed out, in "Le Père Goriot," as characteristic of Balzac—and nowadays there needs to be pointed out particularly—the unflinching fashion in which he attacks the difficult scene. At least one living writer, highly valued amongst us, expends a half of his dexterity in knowing what he must avoid. The "*scène à faire*"—in Monsieur Sarcey's phrase—is for him only the scene to be bridged across and passed over. It is the

triumph of the great as distinguished from the clever—it is the triumph, one allows, of Mr. Thackeray, in "Vanity Fair"—to approach with fearlessness the critical moment, and, having been true already, to be truest of all there. Much of the other work may have been observant chronicle—the work now is revelation. The death scene in "Le Père Goriot" is of just that order.

Balzac—for all his vivid and immediate appreciation of the work of his own brain—would have considered it pretentious, perhaps, to have called this book a tragedy. A romance he is careful not to call it. What he calls it is a drama: "not that this history is *dramatic* in the usual sense of the word; though, when the work is accomplished"—he speaks on its first page—"some tears, perhaps, will have been shed, *intra muros, et extra*." Will it be understood, he asks himself, beyond the limits of Paris? He is doubtful. "The details of these scenes, displaying observation and so much local colour, can scarcely be appreciated, except within the illustrious valley, so full of sufferings that are real, and of joys that are often false." And he puts his sordid boarding-house in the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève; since that, above all other streets, "*est comme un cadre de bronze, le seul qui convienne à ce récit.*" No one knows better than Balzac into what catacombs he is descending—to show there, not empty skulls, indeed, but "dried-up hearts."

Directly round Père Goriot moves, then, the sordid life of the boarding-house: Madame Vauquer, its mistress; the young Rastignac, gifted, ambitious, poor; Vautrin, whose "last incarnation" is elsewhere written of—a being of mysterious fascination, of magic influence, of horrible re-

lationships—one or two elderly or middle-aged women, with tired eyes and withered mouths; and a certain Victorine Taillefer, sometimes hopeful because she is young, but whose life, whose very type, indeed, suggests, at present, only a narrow destiny, a limited personal experience. She lacked, Balzac reminds us, "the very making of a woman—frocks and love-letters." So much for the interior. Outside the boarding-house, surges, of course, Paris—the sense of its nearness and of its infinity—of its ambitions, triumphs, failures, intrigues—never quite lost, and sometimes very dominant. For the troubled figure of le Père Goriot, a stormy background—an immense and appropriate vista.

CHAPTER VIII.

MADAME DE HANSKA.

IN the second half of Balzac's working-life, Evelina de Hanska is the overpowering figure.

When he first became acquainted with this young Polish lady—who, like most of her predecessors in the intimacies of Frenchmen, must needs be a married woman—Balzac was within sight of the loss of the friend his attachment to whom had been in some respects the most romantic—I think it was also in some respects the most sentimental—of his experiences. Madame de Berny's two years' mortal illness had just begun its course. The deep and reasonable friendship with Madame Zulma Carraud had been unaffected by the association now coming to an end, and would be unaffected by the association which was now to begin. Alongside of it there was room for many a relationship with which it need not in any way clash.

And Balzac's more passionate concern for the woman who had troubled his imagination the most—I mean, of course, Madame de Castries—was already over. In October, 1831, he had written to her, probably for the first time; and it was done with civility, with "respectful homage." In February, 1832, she had invited him to

see her, and he was sending her the expression of his gratitude, and his "affectionate thanks," but was modestly protesting that to be personally known was to risk something of the esteem already valued. He was putting off the moment; waiting for some good time in which he might be, not writer, and not artist—he says—but only himself. In July, of that same year, Madame Carraud had received his confidences about the matter—about this human magnet. "I must go climbing at Aix. I must run after some one who is perhaps only laughing at me—one of those aristocratic women you doubtless dislike; one of those exquisite beauties in whom one supposes, immediately, beautiful souls—a true duchess, disdainful, loving, subtle, coquettish. I have never seen the like of her. The woman of one's dreams!" Then came the vivid autumn at Aix-les-Bains. And then that friendship's collapse. "*Un des plus grands chagrins de ma vie.*" A little of its bitterness—no definite portrait—had got, no doubt, into the "Duchesse de Langeais." The thing was in its grave, people would say—but stirring there, perhaps, restlessly, from time to time—when Balzac formed that association with Madame de Hanska, which pleased him, to begin with, and, as years went on, unquestionably satisfied him, but which can never, it may be, have given him the moments he would longest remember.

Madame de Hanska had first to be counted as only one among several friends whom Balzac owed to his production of the "Médecin de Campagne." Monsieur Ferry asserts that she made the novelist's acquaintance at an hotel at Neuchâtel, soon after she had read that book. Balzac was certainly at Neuchâtel in September, 1833;

and he speaks, sixteen years after that, of a sixteen years' knowledge of the lady. But almost the first letter from the one to the other, given in the "Correspondance" —it is a letter, of course, of Balzac's—is dated 1836. By this time he has been twice to Vienna to meet her. And they are clearly on the footing of old friends. "You, who know the whole of my life," Balzac says, in this letter. And it is occupied chiefly with the discussion of two subjects but seldom absent from its writer's mind—the novels of Honoré de Balzac; Honoré de Balzac's money troubles. Just then it happened, that, for the second time in his life, financial difficulties had resulted in what is called "a crisis." That is sometimes quite an impressive way of speaking of a failure. The fact is, that the failure of Werdet, the publisher, had brought about Balzac's. In 1828—that was on the occasion of the first crisis—"an angel" (he means Madame de Berny) had been by his side. From such a being, he, in comparative youth, had been able, he held, to accept assistance without loss of dignity. "To-day I am of an age at which a man no longer inspires the wish to extend a protection which has nothing that compromises. It comes naturally to youth to receive, and naturally to affection to bestow. But for a man who is nearer forty than thirty, protection would be an insult. A man of those years, if weak and without resources in himself, is condemned in all lands."

He tells his friend that he is established at Chaillot —in "the attic that was formerly Jules Sandeau's;" still fortunate in the society of the faithful Auguste Borget; but having left the Rue Cassini, "not without

regret," and ignorant, as yet, of whether it would be possible to keep together the furniture and the library.[1] Then he goes on to very interesting details about his writings. Had Criticism had an influence upon the "Lys dans la Vallée"? All he knows is, out of two thousand copies, Werdet, the publisher, has only sold twelve hundred. "The Belgian brigands" have managed to circulate three thousand. "There are no buyers of my books in France," he declares strongly. "As a consequence, the commercial success which might save me is still far distant." Yet, at that very moment, the "Lys dans la Vallée" had secured no inconsiderable attention. "They say I have described Madame V." And again, "It seems there are as many Monsieur de Mortsaufs cropping up, as there are angels of Clochegourde!"[2]

This letter witnesses to the intimacy of the friendship existing when it was written. When Balzac first met Madame de Hanska, she was a woman of thirty; and "*la femme de trente ans*" was the woman Balzac celebrated; Charles de Bernard having been occupied (as a literary artist, I mean) with "the woman of forty." Monsieur Ferry tells us—in a sketch by no means simple, and by no means full of colour—that the new friend was of middle height, gracious of feature, and with an air of distinction—"*cette distinction vaporeuse*," he adds, "*des*

[1] These were in no case destined to be retained in "the attic"; which, indeed, Balzac only occupied while the pleasanter rooms of the house were being made ready for him.

[2] "Angels of Clochegourde"—Henriettes de Mortsauf, in other words. She is the heroine of the story; and, as a previous foot-note has explained, it was Madame de Berny who for this portrait had really been the sitter.

jolies femmes du Nord." "She spoke several languages" —a circumstance which can have mattered but little to Balzac, unless, indeed, each new language that she acquired, bestowed upon her, as Goethe claimed that it should do, "a new soul." But she was what we call "cultivated"—that is, had several interests of a particular order, and realized contemporary opinion on questions which it is not given to any Age to finally settle.

Nor, when we have said that Madame de Hanska was "cultivated," have we quite done her justice. She had a Northern love of mysticism, which must have stamped her as original, if her friend was minded to compare her only with the Parisian woman of Fashion—with the brilliant, the coquettish, the matter of fact. And that love of mysticism suited Balzac thoroughly. He somehow had it himself. He appreciated it. He used it, not without effect, in his art; and because of Madame de Hanska's possession of it, "Séraphita" came to be written.

Madame de Hanska travelled much, and it was not only at Neuchâtel and at Vienna that Balzac saw her. Sometimes she was with her husband: oftener she was without him. Her daughter was always with her. The Count was detained as much perhaps by public duties as by the administration of his great estates at Vierzschovnia. But on the occasion of the meeting at Neuchâtel, he too had been of the party, and he had liked Balzac, and had invited him—though unavailingly, of course, at that time —to visit the Russian home. Years passed on. Balzac's fortunes, which had been darkened, mended a little, thanks to the stress of his labour. Many letters, and an

occasional meeting, kept alive, through all the chances of his life, his friendship for the Countess. In 1843, the husband died, and Balzac's protestations of affection soon became more urgent. But Madame de Hanska kept always, or for long, a measure of reserve. Yet the two travelled together—met oftener than before. Madame de Hanska, who never forgot her daughter, gave Balzac what was now at least the second place in her consideration. They did not actually marry until March, 1850; but nearly two years before that, the great French writer had transported himself to Vierzschovnia, and had found there, in what he declared to be almost a desert, no satiety in friendship, no dulness in association.

It will readily be conceived that his letters to Madame de Hanska—who certainly shared his interests, and of whose order of mind he never tired—form some of the most intimate, some of the most detailed, some of the most autobiographic of Balzac's correspondence. He tells her about his acquisitions. They are pictures and *bric-à-brac.* He had taste and a genuine love of Fine Art; but not, as he sometimes thought he had, an expert's knowledge or certainty of choice. Thus, a Natoire, at one moment "charming" and "very authentic," is found, at another, displeasing to him, among his more "solid" possessions. And a Breughel, which had doubtless fascinated him at first—and had called out to him to buy it, with the imperiousness the collector wots of—is to be spoken of, afterwards, with an implication of subdued remorse: "the false Breughel:" "I hope to get twenty pounds for the false Breughel."

Then, as, to the very end, he wrote to his sister, to his mother, and to Madame Zulma Carraud, so he wrote, of course, to Madame de Hanska, the schemes for his stories. Some of these letters let us into the secrets of the work-shop. We learn—to give one detail only—that "Pierrette," though, as a matter of fact, included—and doubtless for a proper reason—in the group of stories called "Les Célibataires," belonged, in Balzac's thought, a good deal to "Les Parents Pauvres." The two great stories of that suite will, he says, constitute the suite "with 'Pierrette.'" And how, of the two great stories, the one, "La Cousine Bette," is the complement of the other, "Le Cousin Pons"—which we shall consider in detail further on—Balzac most vividly and lucidly explains.

Then, of course, come, at lesser or longer intervals, the particulars of his debts—now that they are pressing; and now that they are being gradually and surely wiped off. He speaks of works yet in his brain, as actual possessions: romances, still to be written, have, in his imagination, the value of debentures in a first-class railway. And then, when money troubles have been confessed—to do him justice, have been amply bemoaned: perhaps even a little exaggerated—and when hopes and projects have been dwelt upon as fully, comes the expression of his appreciation of this woman's friendship. It is a theme that recurs. Writing as late as 1846, he says, of his Parisian apartment, "I want space. I am suffocating here. And the furniture—which is beautiful—hasn't its proper effect. It's just as necessary for me to have a house as it is to pay my debts. And I am as hurried

to-day as in 1837. For me, the sixteen volumes done in the last five years are an inexplicable miracle." And then the thanks to her. "Were it not for some new courage in my heart—a courage of a kind that will uphold a shipwrecked man, all one long day, in struggle with the billows—were it not for some new courage, why, just in port, I should succumb to the lightest of all waves. Into a fighter's wound you have poured marvellous oil—a perfect woman, a devoted mother, a good and a compassionate friend."

CHAPTER IX.

THE SCHEME OF THE "COMÉDIE."

THE novels of Balzac first assumed their collective or their general title, "La Comédie Humaine," in 1842; and, *àpropos* of it, their author wrote, that year—in July—a Preface, which, like Wordsworth's progressive apologies for his method in Poetry, like the Introduction to "Leaves of Grass," and the Preface to Johnson's "Dictionary," goes down to further generations, it cannot be questioned, as among the great Prefaces of the world. Some tribute to it may be paid here, in taking account of its thoughtfulness and its significance. And we must trace, however briefly, the growth of the scheme by which each separate romance or realistic study was assigned, in a vast field, its own particular station.

Though the title "La Comédie Humaine" was first publicly claimed for Balzac's novels in 1842—that name being bestowed upon an edition that included seventeen volumes—the words had been used by Balzac in a letter written to Madame de Hanska in January, 1838. She was at Vierzschovnia at the time, and had been making inquiries as to a "Balzac Illustré." "Reassure yourself," Balzac says: "it is the whole of my Work, the 'Contes Drolatiques' excepted. It is, in short, that

part of 'The Human Comedy' which is called 'Social Studies.'" A certain grouping had, then, already taken place, and there is every reason to believe that the idea of the arrangement of the stories was of very gradual growth. Indeed, to find the very first instance of what was at all events a series, we have to go back to almost the earliest of Balzac's maturer works. Even in 1830 certain tales were published under a common head. Half a dozen more or less separate fictions were included in the "Scènes de la Vie privée" issued in that year. A second edition, published two years later, contained additions which more than doubled the number. But, in the interval, there had appeared "Romans et Contes Philosophiques." That was in 1831; and the choice of the two general titles—the classification of these tales under the one title and of those under the other—showed something like a definite intention to cover a planned-out ground. In 1834 Balzac had advanced to a project more visibly ambitious—he was using the title "Études de Mœurs au Dix-neuvième Siècle," and dividing such "Studies" into "Scenes of Private Life," "Scenes of Provincial Life," "Scenes of Parisian Life."

Of course other groups had to be added to these, before a name so comprehensive as "The Human Comedy" could, with any show of reason, be taken. But, by 1842, the scheme was ready to be unrolled before the public, in its entirety. To much of it the author could point as having been already executed. And he could promise to the public this or that volume, already devised with reference to the whole, as his next contribution to it. Stone after stone should be added, till all the edifice was

built up. Some stones were added—vast, and of finest carving. But, like many a soaring work in Art or Letters —to name the most conspicuous instance that occurs to me, like the "Liber Studiorum" of Turner — "La Comédie Humaine" was never actually finished. Yet the one work and the other—Balzac's comprehensive survey of his fellow-men, Turner's range over the world of Nature—justified by their own qualities the greatness of the aim, and permitted the high ambition.

The Preface to the "Comédie Humaine" explains its scope and intention; and if these elaborated pages contain, amongst their treasures of thought and of felicitous phrase, much that is of quite temporary interest, that is because their author could not let slip the opportunity to make some answer to a criticism which, he deemed, had wronged him, and because he chose, too, to embrace the chance of advertising definitely, once for all, some personal opinions which he was very anxious it should be understood that he held. The year in which he penned this Preface to the better part of his life's work, Balzac had been particularly exercised about the reviewers' estimate of him. His "Monographie de la Presse Parisienne," appearing at this very time, was a severe expression of his views as to those who sat upon the judgment-seat. And though, in a definite and final utterance on the scheme and basis of his work, he could not, as in minor and more temporary writings, reply in any detail to merely transient cavil, we may be sure that many misinterpretations of his aim were present to his mind when he laid down here, once for all, what his aim had been. If he is accused of immorality, the charge of

immorality, he will have us understand, is a charge made lightly by the feeble and the conventional against the vigorous and the fresh. He supplies the public with a list — superfluous to-day — of his important figures of irreproachable virtue: Pierrette Lorain, Ursule Mirouët, Eugénie Grandet, Ève Chardon, and the rest. He appends examples of practical well-doing, drawn from those *dramatis personæ* of his who are only in the second rank—whose place upon his stage is in the middle distance. "Joseph Lebas," he says, "Genestas, Benassis, Judge Popinot, Bourgeat"—the Auvergnat water-carrier of the "Messe de l'Athée"—and he mentions several others: "Have I not solved, in them, the difficult literary problem of how to make a virtuous person interesting?"

And, if Balzac claims to be a path-breaker, after his own fashion, let it not be forgotten that he is a pillar of Society, besides. Rousseau said that Society depraved men. Balzac thanks it for making men better. And what is the basis of Society? "Christianity, and more particularly Catholicism, is, as I have said in 'Le Médecin de Campagne,' a complete system for the repression of the lower tendencies of mankind. It is the principal element of social order." Again, "It is Christianity that has created modern peoples. It is Christianity that will preserve them." Yet again, "I write by the light of two eternal truths." One of them is "Christianity"—and the declaration may interest us always. If the other is "Monarchy,"—Monarchical Government—we may think that it is as a politician of his period, and of an old-world land, like our own, that Balzac makes it an essential—that he gives it that particular place.

The writer of a preface which mixes the expression of political belief with that of the finest and the widest of social observation, cannot abstain from giving to his readers his theory of popular election. I mention it to hint in a word what was the political position of one who more than once sought to mingle in political life. Balzac is no enemy of popular election—"a capital means," he says, "of founding the law." But it must not be the only means—its sphere must be limited. "With popular election, what representation would there be of the ideas of those imposing minorities of which a Monarchical Government would certainly think? Universal suffrage would give us Government by the masses—the only Government which would be without responsibility, and which would exercise a tyranny that could know no bounds."

In Politics, then, and in Religion, Balzac is on the side of the Conservative. He is an "*écrivain monarchique*" —to use his own phrase—though not of necessity Legitimist. He has good words for Napoleon: "Napoleon adapted, quite marvellously, the electoral principle to the genius of our land. There has never been any Chamber to equal Napoleon's Corps Législatif."

As for Balzac's attitude towards Religion—a man with so vast an understanding, with so varied a sympathy, could not, by any possibility, be a bigot? Yet a man of his imaginative faculty—a "*voyant*," indeed—must make some use of gifts which Heaven has not bestowed on the materialist—the gifts of Reverence and Awe. Organized as he is, Balzac will go far towards doing justice to the instincts of Humanity, towards giving them their

proper weight, towards taking account of the forces which have moved the world. This or that article of belief, held popularly or conventionally, he may no longer adhere to; but at least he finds in Catholicism social convenience, and he finds in it tenderness. How far exactly he at one time or another accepts the tenets of the Church he was born into—the Church that has presented Christianity to him—we may not very easily measure; but we know that like most, I must suppose, of the wisest who have wielded, "with Wit's bauble, Learning's rod," Balzac, at least,

"Believes in Soul, is very sure of God."

But now to Balzac's explanation of the "Comédie Humaine." The thought of it first came to him, he tell us, through a comparison of Man with the beasts. "The animal," he says—paying his tribute to Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, by the way—"takes its external form, or, to speak more precisely, takes the differences in its form, from the place and circumstance in which it is asked to develop itself." Does not Society make of Man as many social species as there are zoological species? Nay—seeing that Man, to-day, is "Nature *plus* Society"—is not Man far more complicated, with differences more difficult to seize? Life with the beasts was found by Buffon to be excessively simple. If Buffon's task with animals was undertaken by Balzac, with Mankind as the theme, how hard must that task become! "Of such a history of the human heart I saw the importance and the poetry; but I saw at first no means of executing it." Separating, then, rather arbi-

trarily, as it seems, Narrative Fiction from the Drama —and so, without requiring to refer to them, getting rid of Shakespeare and Molière—Balzac goes on to say that up to his own time famous story-tellers had confined themselves to the creation of two or three important types, and to the depicting of a phase or side of Life. Sir Walter Scott, however, in Balzac's youth, had done more; but, having not so much imagined a system as found his manner "*dans le feu du travail*," it had not occurred to Sir Walter "so to connect his compositions that each chapter might be a romance, and each romance an epoch." "In noticing this absence of connection, I saw my own way to a system favourable to my work, and saw the possibility of executing it. . . . French Society should be the historian, and I should only be the secretary."

By implication, next, Balzac claims for himself — whether justly or wrongly—as a Catholic, an opportunity of breadth and variety denied, he deems, to Scott as a Protestant. I think there is a germ of truth in what he says on this matter; but I think also that he pushes his theory too far. He remarks that the women of Scott are, as portraits, as representations, relatively false. A something that is in all Human Nature is somehow not in them. Of romantic exterior—he would add— below the surface they are uniformly cold. The excellent Protestant woman knows not, he assures us, the heights and the depths. "*Elle peut être chaste, pure, vertueuse; mais son amour sans expansion sera toujours calme et rangé comme un devoir accompli.*" "If Sir Walter Scott had been Catholic, and if he had taken

upon himself the task of describing with truth the different ways of life which, one after the other, made Scottish history, perhaps the painter of Effie and of Alice —the two figures which in his old age he reproached himself with having designed — would have admitted passions with their faults, with their punishments, and with the qualities that are born of repentance. *La passion est toute l'humanité.*" Sir Walter Scott, indeed, invented romances; and the romance, unlike the novel of Balzac, depicts a world that is better than the actual one. Yet the romance itself—"*cet auguste mensonge*"—must have its details recognizably true. Still more must Balzac's task—Society's history.

It is no slight business then, Balzac continues, to draw with accuracy the two thousand figures that represent the epoch, in his work. And these portraits want their proper frames—they must be stationed, if he is allowed the expression, in their proper galleries. Hence the divisions of the work, the system of classification, already announced and for the most part executed. And, to Balzac's mind—though it is difficult here to follow him closely—each division of the "Études de Mœurs" is related to some special period in human life. "Scènes de la Vie privée" he connects with childhood and adolescence. "Scènes de la Vie de Province," with a period particularly of combat—a period of passions, ambitions, projects. "Scènes de la Vie Parisienne" depicts the tastes, the vices, the exaggerated fancies, provoked by contact with a capital which contains the highest and the lowest, the worst and best. And these scenes must have their local colour. "I have tried to give

some idea of the different districts in our splendid land. My work has its Geography, as it has its Genealogy; place and thing, person and fact; noble and citizen, artizan and peasant; politics, army—a whole world, in short." And, after having painted social life, in these three great divisions, Balzac had gone on to "the exceptional existences which guard the interests of many, or of all." Hence, "Scènes de la Vie Politique"; "Scènes de la Vie Militaire." Lastly, the "Scènes de la Vie de Campagne" might—by a pretty fancy, permitted not unwillingly to the creator of so great a work—"be in some sort the evening of this long day. Here are my purest characters: my application of the principles of order, politics, morality." And then he adds—was it because a Frenchman must be allowed system, even when system is dragged in as an afterthought?—"Such is the base, crowded with figures—such the stage, comic or tragic—on which the 'Études Philosophiques' come to be raised up." And their first volume, the "Peau de Chagrin," connects in some sense the "Études Philosophiques" with the "Études de Mœurs," "by the chain of a fantasy almost Oriental." "The vastness of a plan which includes Society's history and criticism, the analysis of its evils, the discussion of its principles, justifies me, I think, in giving to my work the name under which it is appearing to-day — 'The Human Comedy.' Pretentious, is it? Is it not, rather, true? That is a question for the public to decide, when the work is finished."

A feature only touched upon in the Preface, of which the main purport has now been indicated, is the recurrence of so many characters in so many different stories.

Yet no feature of the work is more remarkable. Following Balzac's own example—considering Narrative Fiction as quite distinct from the Drama—we may remind ourselves that in Balzac's day such recurrence was, as to the fact of it, all but, and as, to the extent of it, wholly unprecedented. Or, including the Drama even, how little was it resorted to by Molière and Shakespeare! How little, too, has it been resorted to since!—though resorted to well enough by Émile Augier, with his Giboyer, the journalist. In narrative Fiction, would Mr. Thackeray's Pendennis have come upon the scene so often, would Mr. Trollope's Crawley—to name but one of his *revenants*—have been brought forth again to say his word of what is almost genius, "Peace, Woman!" to the wife of Bishop Proudie, if Balzac had not given, on his colossal scale, the pattern that might be followed? Again, without Balzac, would Monsieur Zola ever have conceived the history of the Rougon-Macquarts?—though that, I know, in its insistence on hereditary qualities, on physiological improvement or degradation, is a far-reaching development of Balzac's plan, while Mr. Thackeray and Mr. Trollope go but a few steps in the direction of the master's strides.

For myself, I think that in any considerable body of Fiction, dealing intricately with what is practically one period, there is an immense advantage in the reappearance of characters who have already played their parts, larger or smaller, in some other tale. Such reappearance, properly contrived, gives wonderfully the sense of actual life. Some one near you to-day was yesterday in the background. Some one else, important enough to you

years ago, is seen, if we are to speak frankly, with modified interest. And when the characters reappear in sufficient number, and take, not of course their places of old, but their right places for the drama now to be enacted, an atmosphere is formed, a world created—regions of fancy become regions of fact. The "Comédie Humaine," distinguished above most other efforts of imagination, by so many qualities,—by so profound a penetration, so wide a sympathy, so unfailing a tolerance, so exalted a technical skill—is distinguished, above all other efforts, by at least this one particular achievement: the peopling of the novelist's world with men and women who—to borrow a simile from the Theatre which Balzac loved—are now happily "juvenile heroes," now contentedly "useful people," now "walking gentlemen," and now appropriately "supers."

CHAPTER X.

"LE COUSIN PONS."

AMONG the comparatively few stories which Balzac planned and finished after putting forth as the chief instalment of "The Human Comedy" what was indeed to be the bulk of his work, the two related novels known as "Les Parents Pauvres" are the most important. The title of the first of the two was long discussed. Once it was to be "Le Vieux Musicien": then "Le Bonhomme Pons": then "Le Parasite": then, some time after "La Cousine Bette" had been quite fixed on as the title of the second, it became "Le Cousin Pons," that a connection between the two might be clearly inferred and that the suggestion of a friend might be adopted. It was with an extraordinary energy that in the early summer of 1846 Balzac addressed himself to the production of these writings. He had been travelling in the spring. He had got as far as Rome, of which he wisely hesitated to give any description — "You must re-read Lamennais ('Affaires de Rome')," he says to his sister, "and you will know as much as I know." He had been at Tours, afterwards;

and now, writing from Paris on a certain "Tuesday" in June, he says, to Madame de Hanska, who is in Rome still:—"I am going to invent 'Le Vieux Musicien' and 'La Cousine Bette.' . . . The moment exacts from me two or three works of capital importance, which shall overthrow the false gods—the bastard literature—and which shall prove that I am younger, fresher, and more fertile than ever I have been." He adds:—"The 'Vieux Musicien' is the 'poor relation' overwhelmed with indignities and injuries, but true of heart, and taking revenge only by doing men services. The 'Cousine Bette' is the 'poor relation' overwhelmed with indignities and injuries; and avenging meanly the offences her vanity has felt." Again, on the 16th of July, he says, of "Le Cousin Pons" particularly:—"It is arduous work, for it has something in common with 'César Birotteau' and with 'L'Interdiction': what I have to do is to interest readers in a man who is poor and simple and old."

On the 2nd of August, Balzac was able to announce the completion of "Le Cousin Pons." Three hundred and fifty very close pages—the English two-volume novel at the very least—had been written in two months, and each page stuffed, so to say, with thought and knowledge. "Heavy" some bits of it may very likely be called; but no one can say that it is anywhere careless in method or slight in texture. During most of the time of its production, Balzac had profited, no doubt, by the long spring holiday, with its selected companionship. He had had "*le travail facile*," in Paris, those summer days and nights: the stream of Fancy had flowed happily on. The result contented him entirely. As we

read his account of it, perhaps we have need to remember a very true remark he has made in his big general Preface,—that an artist's words of lively and excited hope must not be always taken quite literally, for excessive self-satisfaction. "*Chère âme fraternelle,*" he says to Madame de Hanska—recognizing in her a comrade as well as a friend—"the book is just finished. For me at least, it is one of those fine works, of an extreme simplicity, which contain the whole human heart. It is as great as 'Le Curé de Tours,' and more lucid. It is every bit as touching."

A little later Madame de Hanska objected to the title. "Le Parasite" had been by this time, as Balzac thought, definitely chosen. The objection took the form of a perfectly accurate criticism; and Balzac recognized his mistake. "You are not satisfied with my title, 'Le Parasite.' You say it's a title for an Eighteenth Century comedy, like 'Le Méchant,' 'Le Glorieux,' 'L'Indécis,' 'Le Philosophe Marié.' Well, well—you have settled the matter! And as, by your sovereign orders, the 'Cousine Bette's' companion can only be the 'Cousin Pons,' the title of 'Le Parasite' shall disappear from 'The Human Comedy.'" A longer time than was usual elapsed before the publication of the tale. "La Cousine Bette" had been planned, but had not been written, and it was held to be politic that it should appear the first. Both were to be published in the *Constitutionnel;* Balzac thinking very likely, notwithstanding his own opinion of the first-wrought story, that the average reader would recognize more immediately than the pathos in that, the vividly depicted meanness of the Cousine

Bette, and the almost dreadful power with which the decay of Le Baron Hulot is made visible in a romance in which the attraction of repulsiveness might be relied upon with safety.[1]

It is time to turn to the story itself, from the external circumstances connected with it; and I do not think that Balzac was mistaken in considering that in the "Cousin Pons" he had dealt more sympathetically than ever before with a character on the outside unattractive. Of course the vitality of his art is nowhere more completely shown than by his frequent command of an interest for the ungainly; when, without having recourse precisely to the pathos which in Painting and Fiction pertains more easily to the very venerable, he attracts us to the seemingly dull, for whom Romance is over, and fascinates us in the fortunes of the more than middle-aged. He has done that over and over again in the rich pages of the "Comédie." L'Abbé Birotteau, and, as Balzac himself reminds us, his brother César in another story; le Père Goriot, amidst the strangest combination of squalor and tragedy; "le bon Monsieur Benassis," in "Le Médecin de Campagne"; Judge Popinot in "L'Interdiction"—these are but a few ex-

[1] It may be of interest to add here, what were the sums which now at the very height of his fame—when he was enjoying "a European vogue," as a correspondent of the *Constitutionnel* reminds him, and reputation in France into the bargain—Balzac received for that which was among the ripest and greatest of his work. The newspaper publication of the "Cousine Bette" brought him—to judge by a letter of his own to Madame de Hanska—five hundred and twenty pounds: that of "Le Cousin Pons," not quite four hundred pounds.

amples of Balzac's power in the sympathetic description of those persons of the drama whom it is the fashion of smaller novelists to use but as foils. I think this power, which Balzac had always at command, was never employed more subtly than in "Le Cousin Pons."

It was employed, too, in "Le Cousin Pons," with infinite variety: employed with hardly less effect in the portraiture of Schmucke, the inseparable companion, than in the portraiture of the elderly leading character. I must tell the story with some measure of detail, or must at least expound or comment on its principal personages. But let it be said, at once, that a part of the value of "Le Cousin Pons" lies in the force with which, all along its pages, Balzac impresses upon us the essential *naïveté* of the true artistic nature, and records its profundity of affection. In a world chiefly Bohemian —in a world at times very Bohemian indeed—this expert in the science of the human heart compels us to recognize the richness and the freshness of the finer qualities of men: courage under disaster, gaiety under annoyance, a capacity for abnegation, the sense of brotherhood. "Le Cousin Pons," indeed, with its pourtrayal of the world of the smaller theatres, does not need to chronicle the abandonment, the luxury, the wretchedness, of the "Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes"; but it is yet notable that in its dealing with people of free life and a Past that was wild or shady, it never once, after the modern fashion, courts popularity by disproportionate insistence upon the morbid or the vulgar. The finer realism of Balzac directs him, without error, to the human much oftener than the

bestial. Ignoring no fact—accepting calmly the things that are—affecting no indignation—feeling none—Balzac is yet, with vision and imagination, alive and alert, for the nobler phases of feeling, for the qualities that are exquisite or ideal. Madame Cibot, a Rubens figure, domiciled in the *quartier du Marais*, may, after the adventures of her youth, be an honest housewife; with a thought for money-making, it is true, when money can be made with probity, but with many a thought besides for the well-being of "*mes messieurs*" —the couple of elderly gentlemen whom she and her lord contract to provide for. Topinard, a small *employé* at a minor play-house, shows kindnesses to the failing—a continuous and energetic devotion, such as our Dickens would have been the promptest to perceive and the first to chronicle. But our Dickens, with his English public—a public, too, of forty years ago, on which the shadow of Puritanism rested more heavily than it rests on the public of To-day—Dickens would scarcely have ventured to be what Balzac has been: the historian alike of Madame Topinard's indiscretions and Madame Topinard's goodness.

Furthermore, I know of no story in which there are displayed a greater number of Balzac's characteristics than are shown in "Le Cousin Pons." There is the faultlessness of observation which notes to a nicety every accent of repulsive pride in the newly and the wrongly rich; every line in the heavy figure of the *femme de ménage;* every transient show of feeling in the expressions of a friend. There is Balzac's delighted dealing

with accumulations of statistics: the budget of a nation does not interest him more than the income and expenditure of a *concierge* and his wife, and the cost at which a shabby musician may reasonably hope to exist in Paris. Again—and in a proportion which no other story presents—there is opportunity offered, and opportunity seized, for revelling in the description of the precious objects on which Balzac himself set such store. Cousin Pons was a collector. So was Balzac. It is said that many a picture—they were not always authentic pictures—in Balzac's home, took up abode for a while, in his imagination, in the humble apartment of Cousin Pons. Cousin Pons collected laboriously. He collected with economy. A small musician could not compete with a Rothschild. And—sad, yet invigorating necessity, for the impecunious tasteful, for the cultivated poor!—he "admitted no acquisition that cost more than a hundred francs." Yet the true qualifications for a collector, as Balzac has defined them—"a stag's unwearied legs, an idler's leisure, a Jew's patience," to say nothing of appreciation and knowledge—had enabled him to bring together such curiosities and things of beauty as made his rooms a smaller Cluny. And Balzac was never happier than when, in page after page of this novel, he dilated upon the canvasses of Ruysdael and of Hobbema, the furniture of Boule and Gouthière and Reisener and Jacob, the porcelain of Sèvres and of Saxony, Thouvenin's bookbinding.

Nor, finally, can it be left quite out of the account that even a student of Humanity so impartial as Balzac had here a definite pleasure, a definite quickening of the

pulse, when the sensations and the temperament of a lover and practitioner of Music had to be described. In another story, in a shorter one—it was in "Gambara"—the dreams of a musician, who was mad and a genius, had been treated sympathetically. A wide range of musical knowledge had been made evident. And all that was then fresh—acclaimed or disputed—in the method of Meyerbeer, had been elaborately analyzed. "Robert le Diable," at all events, received no profounder criticism. The gentle Pons—whose heart, after all, was set upon the accumulation of *bric-à-brac*, more than on a musician's triumphs—may lack the fascination of Paolo Gambara, with his crazy fire. Still, in "Le Cousin Pons," as in the shorter story, every musical allusion is made with sensibility and knowledge; so that in this, as in so many other matters, Balzac is visibly akin to the writer of "Abt Vogler" and of "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha," and of the parleying with Charles Avison—"whilome of Newcastle, organist." In his appreciation of this particular art, Balzac has nothing in common with Théophile Gautier—a lover, like himself, of beautiful colour and line, but one who is said to have considered that a concert of music was exhaustively described when he had succeeded in defining it as "the most expensive noise he knew."[1]

But who precisely was this "old musician," this "poor

[1] Again, in "Massimilla Doni," Balzac had occupied himself with Music. Rossini had been in part the theme. "*Dans cinq ans 'Massimilla Doni' sera comprise comme une belle explication des plus intimes procédés de l'art.*"

relation," and what were his fortunes? Who was this Cousin Pons, whose story shows pre-eminently the penetration of Balzac and his tolerance, his large capacity to forgive the weakest and to sympathize with the best? The first description of the man is a masterpiece. Dressed, in 1844, in the costume of more than thirty years earlier, this "glorious *débris* of the Empire," in a greenish coat, with white metal buttons, and a nut-coloured spencer, was something of an entertainment, was half a laughing-stock, to the idlers of the boulevard, who saw him daily pass. Though sixty years old, and looking more than his years, he walked along habitually with his nose high in the air: very ugly, but sometimes very happy-looking—as content with himself, Balzac reminds us—wishing that there shall be no mistake as to the extent of Pons's self-satisfaction—as content with himself "as a trader who has done a capital stroke of business, or a lover who has this moment left a boudoir." Alas! this expression was pretty much confined to the hours when Pons had made an acquisition. All the laws of anatomy, we are further told, were set at defiance in his visage. There was a protuberance where there ought to have been a hollow; and where you expected a bone, you came only upon flesh. Yet somehow the shallowest of the idlers who scoffed, was arrested in his laugh:—"The excessive melancholy that overflowed from the pale eyes, reached the mocker himself, and froze the jest upon his lips. The thought arose—Here was a poor devil to whom Nature had forbidden any expression of affection or Love: since such expression could but make the woman who caused it either laugh or be hurt. A

Frenchman is silent in the presence of such a misfortune. It seems the worst of all fates to him—to be unable to be pleasing!" The person so smiled at, and so pitied, was, nevertheless, a "*grand prix*": the writer of the first cantata the Institute "crowned," after the re-establishment of the French Academy in Rome. It was Monsieur Sylvain Pons—"the author of some famous songs of sentiment our mothers warbled; and of two or three operas, played about 1816; and of some later compositions, unheard and unpublished." For, like the fashion of his spencer, Pons's day was past.

Pons was out of vogue through no vice of his own, through no especial negligence, at the epoch at which Balzac took up his history. But in the earlier years the seeds of failure had been sown, or the seeds of ultimate success forgotten to be planted. His gift of Melody had been unsupported by a study of Counter-point; and he who, had he but mastered the more modern orchestration, might have become "not a Rossini," Balzac tells us, "but a Hérold," had drifted down, when middle-age was upon him, into a musician whose compositions could only gratify the behind-hand. Now that he was within sight of old age, his name was unknown even at the music-shops. He conducted the orchestra at a minor theatre, of which the Count Popinot—the nephew of the just judge—had been able to bestow the management upon "the illustrious Gaudissard." We are not, however, to withdraw our esteem from Pons because we are obliged to bestow on him our pity. Pons could yet weep, with rapture and a not ignoble envy, when a *virtuoso*—combing out, like Paganini,

"the fierce electric sparks"—performed to perfection a difficult thing. Pons is to be respected because he possessed "that which is rare in Paris," "the genius of admiration, of comprehension — the single faculty by which an ordinary man becomes the brother of a poet." Much of this "indefatigable admiration" he bestowed on Music: still more he bestowed on exquisite material things, on the beauty and the splendour of that which the cunning hand had wrought. Again, Pons —like Schmucke, his bosom friend—had his more purely personal qualities. He was gentle; he was modest; he respected himself, and every one with whom he had to do. He was liked, then, at the theatre. "Besides," says Balzac, "in every sphere, a limpid life, a faultless honesty, compel, from even the worst hearts, some measure of regard. In Paris, an unimpeachable virtue has the success of a great diamond. It is such a curiosity."

Technically, it is a triumph of Art to have placed a character of the simplicity of Pons, not in contrast to, but in recognizable harmony with, a character that is simpler still. Schmucke, the bosom friend—who was given to the leader of the orchestra at an age when, except by genius, fresh friendship has almost ceased to be hoped for—Schmucke is the final expression, in Fiction, of a German's most lovable qualities: the capacity for deep affection; a thoroughness of devotion; a philosophical, benevolent acceptance of Humanity's faults; a spirit of unworldliness; a need of reverie; the love of one luxury, one orgy, only—an orgy of Music. Pons was attached very

thoroughly to Schmucke. Schmucke was doubtless indispensable to him; yet, in Pons's life, Schmucke was not the beginning and the end. There was the beloved collection, the assembled *bric-à-brac;* and there were the well-arranged dinners—Pons's one weakness—the faultlessly-ordered dinners which, even when he was by no means actively sought for, Pons partook of, in great houses, whose doors, sometimes relationship, sometimes only ancient custom, opened to him. His German friend was not the whole world to the French musician. But, to Schmucke, Pons was all—absolutely. Music itself—the sentiment, the religion of it—could hardly be reckoned as a thing independent of their friendship. Why, it was Music that had brought them together.

But if no small portion of the art of the story consists in the ability which Balzac gives us to realize the individuality of natures that are so much alike, sharp contrast is not wanting between these ingenuous souls and the people of the theatre; between Pons and Schmucke, on the one hand, and the *concierge* and his world, on the other; between the elderly Bohemians —if one may call them so—with their existence, placid as that of the *bourgeois*, and people more or less in Society, the Camusots de Marville, Pons's kinsfolk, not even superficially polite to him, grasping and vulgar and pushing, from whom Heaven has withheld not only the grace of sensibility, but the gift of tact. The interest of the story, in its later parts, hangs on the conflict between these wily Camusots de Marville and their agent Fraisier, with the unlessoned Schmucke, over the possession of what the dying Pons had be-

queathed to his faithful companion — the priceless treasures of Art and of artistic Handicraft, of which the elderly collector, true connoisseur though he was, had not fully understood the money value.

There is no fitter place than the chapter in which "Le Cousin Pons" is eulogized, for making the inquiry—or at the least for suggesting it—How far are we to trust Balzac on matters of fact, when he talks learnedly—or is it only lovingly and glibly?—about the things of Art: the different periods of painter or artistic craftsman, the characteristics of a fabric of porcelain? I think the "realism" of Balzac, in some of these matters, does not go very far. He loved the things genuinely. He was full enough of knowledge about them to be able to make of them—in all his writings on them—an opulent background, as it were; an atmosphere—like tapestry itself, in a chamber—amongst which, or against which, his breathing men and women move seemingly with added vitality and added dignity. But I would rather hear from Monsieur Edmond de Goncourt than from Balzac, whether Watteau did ever paint a fan for Madame de Pompadour. I do not believe for a moment that he did—though le Cousin Pons possessed the thing. I do not believe that for Boucher's patroness and pupil, Watteau anticipated the discharge of Boucher's function.

Balzac and Cousin Pons were lovers of beautiful clocks. Pons exchanged, seven times, a good clock for a better one. At last he succeeded in getting a clock "in Boule's first manner"; for Boule, we are told, "had two manners, as Raphael had three. In the first, he combined copper with ebony; and, in the second—con-

trary to his own convictions—he acquiesced in tortoise-shell. He accomplished wonders, to outstrip his rivals —those who had been the inventors of the tortoiseshell marquetry."

Pons talked to his young kinswoman, Cécile de Marville, about Continental porcelains. In the great "Histoire de la Porcelaine," by Jacquemart and Le Blant, I find his appreciation of them discussed, and to some extent condemned. Balzac made Cousin Pons assure the stupid young lady,—"Before fifty years have passed, Frankenthal porcelain, which I have collected for the last twenty years, will be worth twice as much as the *pâte tendre* of Sèvres." Again, "Frankenthal is older than our fabric of Sèvres." And then, upon the all-important question of "marks," Pons says—after talking of Frankenthal with accuracy—"*Vincennes signait avec un cor*," and "*Berlin a deux barres.*" But Jacquemart and Le Blant assure us that the "cor" is the mark of Chantilly, and that the signature of Berlin is a sceptre; and that Frankenthal is not so old as Sèvres, which dates from 1740, while Frankenthal began only in 1755. They declare, further, that though this fabric of the Palatinate is certainly amongst those which should be represented in a collection, it must be spoken of with less enthusiasm than Balzac imagined. "In form and taste, what Frankenthal produced was—*purely German.*"

Is it possible for Frenchmen to be more crushing? Yet, in the prodigality of Cousin Pons's information, even these mistakes may be condoned.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LATER YEARS.

IN his later years Balzac sojourned less than he had been accustomed to do in the French provinces. We have seen already that just before he addressed himself to the task of "Les Parents Pauvres" he had been in Italy: not indeed for the first time, for a few years earlier he had spent a spring in Milan. Germany too was visited, or, of necessity, passed through, as Balzac was on the way to pay a visit, that became almost a residence, at Madame de Hanska's, within the borders of Russia. But the greater portion of his time was spent in Paris or its neighbourhood. "Les Jardies," at Ville-d'Avray, had been at no disqualifying distance from the streets, the drawing-rooms, and the theatres; Passy was yet nearer; and, later still, Balzac looked down upon the capital from the modest heights of the Rue Fortunée—now the Rue Balzac—which lies between the Champs Elysées, and the top of the Faubourg St. Honoré: very near to the Arc de Triomphe. It was in the last-named abode—an altered and enlarged *pavillon* of the old Hôtel

Beaujon, itself now destroyed: this detached part of it suggesting, pleasantly, the Eighteenth Century, in a modern quarter—that Balzac finally grouped round him earlier possessions with latest acquisitions: the pictures and the *bric-à-brac* he loved.

I suppose from the first moment that he occupied the place, or busied himself with preparations to occupy it, he looked forward to its occupation by Madame de Hanska besides. He writes to her, when she is taking the waters at Creuznach: "I have exchanged the little picture that cost fifty francs, and that Chenavard protested was not worth two sous; getting, in place of it, a delicious sketch of the birth of Louis the Fourteenth—an 'Adoration of the Shepherds'—the shepherds with their hair dressed in the fashion of the time, and being, in fact, Louis the Thirteenth and his Ministers. Come now! with lapse of years I shall obtain your confidence—at least in matters of *bric-à-brac*. But you don't realize how I torment myself about such things, nor how seriously my mind takes it when I see that I have here something that is below the mark. Rest in peace, then; I follow your good counsels—I never buy on the first moment's fancy; I consult, examine, hesitate."

A little later, to Georges de Mniszech, who was to be Madame de Hanska's son-in-law, he writes about a portrait by Greuze; and I quote the passage that the reader may do Balzac the justice of realizing how, in critical appreciation of the great French School, he was in advance of his day. "This good old fellow"—it was a certain picture-restorer—"has let me have, for a very

little money, and for the love he bears me, a magnificent 'find,' that he lately came upon: a portrait of Greuze's wife, done by Greuze; you may see her in his 'Accordée de Village.' Believe me, until you've examined this thing, you don't know what the French School really is. In a certain direction Rubens, Rembrandt, Raphael, and Titian are not stronger. Life pulses in this flesh! And there is no work in it—only inspiration."

Then, having talked about his pictures further, and spoken of himself familiarly under the nickname of "Bilboquet"—Dickens, it will be remembered, had a nickname for himself: "the Inimitable," was it not?—Balzac concentrates his thoughts on the three distant ones who in spirit are always near him. They are Madame de Hanska, and the young people who are dearest to her. And Balzac says, "I pray to God but seldom. Would that I prayed to Him oftener!—for you two, and for that unparalleled mother whom we love."

I have said before, that Madame de Hanska's husband died in 1843, and that the lady did not marry Balzac until March, 1850. She had her children to consider; her estate to guard. A great friendship had already given her much of the best that marriage could afford. On her side there was a certain amount of hesitation to take the final, the irrevocable step. And Balzac—willing at times to travel half across Europe, to have four days in her company: so great a voyager on her account, that Madame de Girardin called him a "*vetturino per amore*"—Balzac himself had his pride in the matter. He was, even now, but slowly emerging from the latest of his difficulties. He would owe nothing to

Madame de Hanska. Yet he must live "splendidly." Joubert-like, *il s'inquiétait de perfection*—but, in his case, it was "perfection" in material things as well as in the things of the spirit. His place in the Rue Fortunée must be worthy of its occupants, though no one could have believed more thoroughly than Balzac did in the truth of his own phrase, "*Nous ne sommes que par l'âme.*" [1]

The wish for money was, I suspect, one of the reasons why, in these later years, Balzac busied himself with the theatre. A theatrical triumph, then, as now, was nothing less than a fortune. And Balzac wanted a fortune, though he would never have consciously sacrificed to it any quality of his Art. But, as the requirements of the theatre are generally judged, Balzac was by no means specially fitted to satisfy them. The extraordinarily ingenious mechanism of the most adroit of the pure Philistines, Monsieur Scribe—in the "Verre d'Eau," for instance—was not at his command: nor could he follow that dexterous master of theatrical scaffolding in the deliberate erection of a play of five acts, not one of which, even by accident, should come near to literary charm.[2] On the other hand, matter was so much with Balzac—and manner, in comparison with that, so little—

[1] "*Nous ne sommes que par l'âme*," Balzac had written, years before, to one who, somewhat needlessly, was losing courage for life. "*Savez-vous si la vôtre a reçu tous ses développements, si vous respirez l'air par tous vos pores, si tous vos yeux voient?*"

[2] Not near to literary charm: yet a character in Scribe's "Soldat-Laboureur"—Chauvin—gave us the word Chauvinism; and some force, one allows, for his own time at all events, must pertain to the creator of a type.

ideas surged up in Balzac's mind so affluently—that he was never likely to be able to furnish the mere dainties of expression, the mere refinements of admirable melody and sentimental emotion, which were so much of the stock-in-trade of Alfred de Musset. The fairy lightness of a De Musset *proverbe* was beyond him. So, perhaps, was the pure reverie and beauty of the "Nuit d'Octobre": which became possible on the stage only through the art of Favart and Delaunay. No: Balzac at the theatre could be but the old Balzac; and travelling, somewhat awkwardly, it might be, an unfamiliar road. A writer, whose effects are built up slowly; a writer, one of whose great weapons is that very opportunity for description which is permitted only to the narrative fable; a profound analyst; an artist not so much nimble as inconceivably subtle in perception and in method—what wonder that Balzac died without producing a single piece which, as he left it, might be reckoned on to hold the Stage? He had not fashioned himself for the theatre, as men of genius, or of the highest talent—like Émile Augier, and the younger Dumas—did, afterwards.

"Vautrin" was played for two nights, in the year 1840; and, owing to an audacious personal imitation by one of its performers, it was then forbidden—it became necessary to withdraw it. "Les Ressources de Quinola" had a stormy reception, at the Odéon, in 1842. "La Marâtre" was brought out at the Théâtre Historique in 1848. And at the same time Balzac was expecting the production—first at the Français, but afterwards elsewhere—of the only play of his which we know at all in England. This was "Le Faiseur"—otherwise "Mercadet." But

the Français refused it. The Théâtre Historique accepted it, and wanted to alter it—to turn into what Balzac considered "a crude melodrama," that of which the real interest depended on the presence of high comedy. In a shortened and much changed form, it was played, at the Gymnase, just after his death; and our own generation has seen, with great advantage, Monsieur Got, in French, and Mr. Charles Mathews, in English, in the leading part.[1] The Theatre, which he counted upon as a source of profit, was really to Balzac hardly anything but a source of worry. Yet he never could quite contentedly let it alone. One of his latest acts was to plan "Le Roi des Mendiants," with a part for Frederick Lemaître.

Two absences in Russia—only the second of which was ended by his return with Madame de Hanska as his wife—told a good deal against the execution of his literary projects. He could have written there in tranquillity—and, so far, things would have been well—but, beyond the lady of whom he never tired, and an extremely intelligent doctor, there was scarcely a soul to talk to; and, moreover, at least upon his second very long visit, Balzac was out of spirits at the obstacles that still presented themselves to delay his marriage. Now the Czar refused permission. Now there was the question of money. Now a certain amount of jealousy had declared itself on the part of his venerable mother, living in these days at Suresnes, chiefly on an

[1] The English version called "A Game of Speculation," is by George Henry Lewes. In it, as Mathews performed it, the dissecting knife certainly entertained, even while it probed.

allowance which he made her. She had, of late years, administered his affairs, to some extent, in his absences. She, who had been disposed to be very dictatorial in his youth, was at present carrying out his behests with fidelity, if not at all times with tact. And she did not like to be interfered with; and at Vierzschovnia her sentiment was well understood. Again, Balzac was, in feeling, a sufferer by the losses which, about the time of the upsetting of the Government of Louis Philippe, his brother-in-law, Monsieur Surville, sustained. The long-beloved "Laure" and her children, now almost young women, were obliged to retrench. "The strictly necessary," Balzac writes to his sister, "is all we can allow ourselves in critical times." And he maintains that though the alterations in the Rue Fortunée must still be carried out, his personal expenses are slight.

At last, however, these various difficulties in the way of Balzac's marrying Madame de Hanska were overcome. In France, things were going to be better, though they would be better but slowly:—"Louis Napoleon is certainly a rope on which we hoist ourselves out of the gutter of the Republic." And, on the 15th of March, 1850, Balzac wrote to his mother:—"Thank God, yesterday, at seven o'clock, my marriage was celebrated in the church of Sainte-Barbe de Berditchef, and benediction given by a priest deputed by the Bishop of Jitomir. Monsiegneur would have liked to perform the service himself, but, as that was impossible, he sent the Abbé Czarouski, the oldest of the glories of the Polish Catholic Clergy. . . . We are now two to thank you for the care you have bestowed on our house—two to prove our affection for

you. . . . I must repeat, never spare cab-hire when you run about Paris upon our affairs. . . . I hope your health is excellent."

Balzac's own health, however, was far from excellent. It was bad, and had been bad for a year or two. The excessive labours which, for a whole generation, he had undergone; the strain of production, in which he had been wont to be supported only by excitement and by coffee; the vigils; the sedentary existence; last of all, it is conjectured, the particular effort which it had cost him to write "La Cousine Bette" within narrow limits of time—these things had at length broken down his splendid strength. For "a simple hypertrophy of the heart" he had been treated in Russia; and, "had Frédéric Soulié had my doctor and my treatment he would have been alive now." For the time, the evil seemed to have been remedied. It was, nevertheless, the beginning of the end. Yet Balzac was accustomed to be sanguine. He often looked forward happily. "This marriage," he wrote to Madame Zulma Carraud, "is, I think, the recompense Heaven gives me for so much adversity so many years of labour, so many difficulties encountered and overcome." Again, however, the thought is forced upon us: In the very consciousness—so characteristic of him—of all these difficulties, of all these labours, of the price he had paid for becoming the artist that he was, is there not to be discerned a forewarning of the end, a note of the imminent tragedy?

A few weeks after he was married—almost before the passports had been prepared and the last trunks packed—Balzac's health was again upset. "It is

some return of that affection of the heart: the chest, too. We have been losing ground unquestionably. The twelve days I am still to stay here the doctor will employ in making me more fit to stand the journey." A fortnight later he had not yet started. "I can hardly write to you," he says to his mother, "through an affection of the eyes. It comes in part from the treatment I have had to follow. The doctor is in no way alarmed." Before the middle of May they had got as far as Dresden, from which city the editor of the *Constitutionnel*, Louis Véron, was invited to "excuse this scrawl." "I have a nervous affection," Balzac says, "which shows itself in the eyes and in the heart."

About the end of the month, Balzac reached Paris; and the last letter preserved for us in his "Correspondance" is one that he did not pen, but dictated: Madame de Balzac being his secretary. It was written, about the middle of June, to Théophile Gautier, who had always been faithful to him: a praiser and still a critic of his work, a friend interested in his health and his concerns. "To-day I have shaken off a bronchial cold: to-morrow they will be able to attack the malady that is somewhat disquieting—though I hope to be cured of it. The heart is really its seat." Then, scrawled by his own hand, are six or seven words:—"I can neither read nor write." His walking powers failed him. Arsène Houssaye—with whom he wanted to confer about a possible revival of "Les Ressources de Quinola" at the Théâtre Français—has given a pitiable account of his condition, and has furnished a highly-coloured, but

I do not say in the main an unveracious, narrative of how Balzac extracted from his doctor a plain, unvarnished opinion of what were his prospects. Had he six months—he put it to the doctor—in which to make his preparations? "A man such as myself owes a testament to the public." Whatever were the preparations, whatever the testament, "To-day," Balzac was told, was the day to begin them.

To Victor Hugo—before whose candidature for the French Academy, Balzac, on one of the two occasions on which he had presented himself, had had the courtesy, the graciousness, the superfluous modesty, to retire—to Victor Hugo, with whom his relations were ever of the kind which should subsist between exceptional persons, great geniuses who fill no ordinary place, but trail like comets across the literary sky—to Victor Hugo did it fall to give, in his "Choses Vues," the most vivid description of the circumstances of Balzac's death. I must not be stinting of quotation :—

"On the 18th of August, 1850," Hugo writes, "my wife, who had been to see Madame de Balzac during the day, said to me, 'Balzac is dying.' I made haste. . . . After the Revolution of February, he had gone to Russia, and had married there. Some days before his departure I had met him on the Boulevard. He was complaining at the time, and he seemed to breathe hurriedly. In May, 1850, he came back to France, married, rich, and dying. His legs were already swollen. Four doctors examined him.[1] One of them, Monsieur Louis, said to me, on the 6th of July, 'He hasn't six

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[1] The reader will remember, in reading this, and will recall almost as a prophecy, the account of the examination and consultation by the various doctors in the "Peau de Chagrin."

weeks to live.' . . . Having left the table, then, I took a carriage to the Rue Fortunée, No. 14. Of what remained of Monsieur de Beaujon's hotel, Balzac had made a charming residence, furnished magnificently. For all garden it had a long but narrow court, all pathway and flower-borders."

It was a moonlight night, Victor Hugo says. The street was deserted. There was no answer to his first ringing of the house-bell. Then, at the second ring, a woman, weeping—"*Que veut Monsieur?*" Hugo was shown into a salon on the ground-floor. Opposite the mantel-piece was the colossal marble bust of Balzac, by David d'Angers. "Another woman" presently appeared, and with the words, "*Il se meurt. Madame est rentrée chez elle.*" Then, being questioned, "The doctors gave him up yesterday. He has a wound in the left leg. *La gangrène y est.* He passed a bad night, and this morning, by nine o'clock, he was unable to speak." Madame de Balzac had sent out for a priest. The priest had arrived. He had administered the sacrament. "And Monsieur made a sign to let us know that he had understood. An hour afterwards he took his sister's hand."

"The woman left me. The candle scarcely illumined the magnificent Pourbus, the magnificent Holbein, on the walls. The bust of marble was like the ghost of the man who was to die. *Une odeur de cadavre emplissait la maison.* Monsieur Surville entered, and confirmed what the woman had said. I asked to see Monsieur de Balzac. We crossed a corridor and mounted a staircase crowded with vases, statues, and enamels. Another corridor—I saw a door that was open. I heard a sinister noise—a rough and loud breathing. I was in Balzac's bed-chamber. The bed was in the middle of the room: Balzac, supported on it, as best he might be, by

pillows and by cushions taken from the sofa. I saw his profile, which was like that of Napoleon. An old sick-nurse and a servant of the house stood one on either side the bed. I lifted the counterpane, and took the hand of Balzac. The nurse said to me, 'He will die about dawn.' I came downstairs again: bearing away with me the memory of that livid face."

When Hugo reached his home, several visitors were waiting to pay their respects to him. He was full of what he had just seen, and he says that he told his visitors, "Europe is on the point of losing a great mind."

Balzac died in the night.

On the Wednesday—two days afterwards—they buried him. The service was at St. Philippe du Roule, already perhaps what it was in the Second Empire—the fashionable church of the Faubourg St. Honoré. The Minister of the Interior, Baroche, sat very near to Victor Hugo, during the service. They spoke several times. "And Baroche said to me, 'He was a distinguished man.' I said to Baroche, 'He was a genius.' We went, all of us, to Père-la-Chaise, on foot. Alexandre Dumas was by me. The grave was near Charles Nodier's, near Casimir Delavigne's. The priest said the last prayer, and I uttered a few words. The sun was sinking while I spoke. All Paris appeared before my eyes in the distance—in the splendid mist of the sunset."

The words he spoke—recorded elsewhere, and not in the "Choses Vues"—were eloquent, of course, and generous; admirable in intention, though at bottom some of them were slight, and some with a *parti-pris*. Still, on the whole, the orator fitted himself to the occasion. Victor Hugo paid his tribute to the "splendid and

sovereign intelligence"—to the work by which "Tacitus was recalled, and Suetonius, and Beaumarchais, and Rabelais"—the work which, for all its realism, "discloses suddenly, at times, the most sombre and tragic ideal." Then, characteristically, he went on to claim that Balzac, spite of himself, "was of the strong race of Revolutionary writers. He tears something from every one—from one an illusion, from another a hope; a cry from these, and from those a mask." Again, "He digs into and sounds the depths of the abyss which each man is; and from these alarming studies, which made Molière melancholy, and Rousseau misanthropic, Balzac arises, able to be serene and to smile." Finally :—

"His death has smitten Paris. Some months ago he came back into France. Feeling that he was dying, he wished to see again his native land—as, on the eve of a long journey, one goes to one's mother, to kiss her. Sometimes, in the presence of the dead—when the dead are illustrious—one feels, with especial distinctness, the heavenly destiny of that Intelligence which is called Man. It passes over the Earth to suffer and be purified."

And so, at fifty-one years old, Balzac died; after a working-life not so long as Shakespeare's, and only half as long as Goethe's. It was an existence, as we have seen, not empty of experience, and, as we have seen, too, full, to the very brim, of labour. That happiness in marriage came to him so late, will to some appear a misfortune. Its extreme brevity must, in any case, be pathetic.

But if Balzac had married young, it is evident that he could not have married Madame de Hanska, with her range of sympathies, or Madame de Berny, with her faculty

for admonition and restraint, or the Duchesse de Castries, with what was to him her charm. He would in all likelihood have married somebody who was at best a *bourgeoise.* And would he, any more than Goethe—great souls, both of them, of whom, in a certain sense and measure, Emerson's saying is true: "To the progressive soul, loves and friendships are momentary"—would he have been happy with a *bourgeoise?* Consider Balzac, for a moment, as husband and ratepayer! I doubt if he possessed sufficient capacity for those "responsibilities of married life" which the English curate—and who shall blame him for it?—takes upon himself so cheerfully, and which, in the quite conventional acceptation of the things in which they consist, the average haberdasher discharges very well. Yet if, in married life, it may be any advantage to have a generous comprehension of a nature other than your own—if it may count for anything to appreciate, even to idealization, the charm of the woman or the freshness of the child—if, further, there be any virtue in being, in companionship, a mental nourishment, a stimulus to the spirit—then it is possible that Balzac would not have lagged irretrievably behind the tradesman of the provinces, or the divine of the suburb.

A dubious passage, in a book distinguished on the whole by enlightenment and frankness—Mr. Lewes's "Life of Goethe"—blames, by implication, the one great genius of German Literature, because he did not marry Frederika. I have sometimes wondered whether those phrases of propriety conveyed the true mind of Mr. Lewes on the matter, or, whether they were especially

addressed to a public likely to appreciate them. In neither case can I follow Mr. Lewes's example, and moralize beneficially, because Honoré de Balzac did not marry whatever pleasant little *bourgeoise*, of the early unrecorded days, represented Frederika to him. Had he done so, would the "Comédie Humaine" ever have been written?—would the world ever have been endowed with the work which this profound and tolerant observer, with his unremitting artistry, had it in him to give? It might have been. But that would have been a question for the pleasant little *bourgeoise's* decision. It would have been taken—in some measure, at least—out of Balzac's hands.[1]

How deep was Balzac's enjoyment of the woman who was his friend for years—from "Neuchâtel, 1833"—the words he ordered to be engraved upon a piece of goldsmith's work that he wanted to offer her—from "Neuchâtel, 1833," to the last days in Paris—has been already set forth. "She has," he wrote once, "the effect upon the spirit, that Nice and Naples have upon the frame."[2] And as time went on, he took her daughter easily within the range of his sympathies. From Russia, about a year before his marriage, he had written to his nieces—Madame Surville's children—a delightful note, descriptive of this girl. Some of it might have been put into a story: with hardly a word altered. She was then a bride. "She

[1] Hard, after all—is it not?—to make Frederika one's illustration! For one feels so much the charm of her temperament—that in that there might have been safety.

[2] The simile was a faulty one, as Naples gives a fever, and Nice excites, rather than calms. But it was well meant.

has a genius for Music, as she has an immense love of it. Her hands are a child's hands: imperceptible, fluid, white—three of them could be held within mine—yet these hands, on the piano, have a touch of iron. They remind one of Liszt. Music, her mother, her husband—there, in three words, is her character." And he added, very appreciatively, that, as to her *physique*, she had "grace," a nose "prettily drawn," a figure "supple and slight," and that all these good things were made the most of by a certain pride, "that has Race in it; a certain easy air of grandeur, lacking to some Queens." "That eternal distinction—*cet air grande dame*—is one of the most precious gifts that God—the God of women—can by any possibility bestow."

It is well that Balzac, loving and admiring, each in her own way, this mother and this girl, never lived to see the misfortunes of their later days. The grievous tale must be told, though briefly. For a quarter of a century after Balzac's death, his widow and his step-daughter and the younger woman's husband lived chiefly in the Parisian house, whose interior the great writer had to some extent fashioned, and which he had last inhabited. Madame de Balzac fondly and piously preserved, in the condition they were in when he died, the three rooms which had been her husband's. They were for ever to remain untouched. Even the alterations and enlargements which were planned and begun nearly thirty years after his death—when the family were living at the Château de Beauregard, at Villeneuve-Saint-Georges—were in no wise to affect the chambers he had frequented the most. But the son-in-law, the

Comte Mniszech, died in 1881, after several years of ill-health and of mental deterioration; and all that period seems to have been a time when both mother and daughter were lacking not alone in wisdom, but in average common-sense. They are believed to have bought things lavishly—things that nobody wanted—and to have sold them again, one after the other, for very nearly nothing. Exactly how they managed to get through the fortune which had certainly been theirs, it is not easy to understand; but, "in virtue of an order of the President of the Civil Tribunal of Corbeil, dated February 9th, 1882," the country house—the Château de Beauregard—with all its furniture and pictures, was sold by auction. Other picture-sales had taken place, under the shelter of the anonymous, at the Hôtel des Ventes.

On the 10th of April, Madame de Balzac died. "By order of justice," her remaining effects—amongst them, Balzac's library, the Boule cabinets, some of his manuscripts, the proofs which he had corrected so continually that they had more than the interest of the first drafts of his stories—were sold without delay. The manuscript of "Eugénie Grandet" was amongst these things. It had been given by its writer to Evelina de Hanska, "the 24th December, 1833"; three months only after he had first seen her.

A worse thing happened than the actual sale. For a day before the house in the Rue Balzac—the Rue Fortunée of old—was handed over to its new possessor, Madame Salamon de Rothschild, it had been exposed to the curiosity and the greed of a swarm of neighbours.

Afterwards, from little tradespeople of the quarter, this and that manuscript, which had been hurriedly "conveyed," were with difficulty recovered. But, to avoid what seemed an inevitable scattering upon the fatal day, there had already been a bonfire. The place was, as it were, wrecked. And the Countess Mniszech, living afterwards, lonely and poor—and, I fear, discredited besides—in a Parisian lodging-house—was a wreck herself: a derelict indeed—stranded after storm that had followed sunshine.

CHAPTER XII.

BALZAC.

A FEW days after the death of the author of the "Human Comedy," Sainte-Beuve wrote, in the *Constitutionnel*, upon "Monsieur de Balzac," a "*causerie*" not unworthy of its place in a series distinguished for lucidity and breadth. The time had not come, Sainte-Beuve properly said, for a final analysis of the novelist's mind and talent. Such a dissection is not to be conducted "on a newly made tomb," and least of all, as the calm critic recognized, when death had touched one who was yet "full of force and fertility," "full, seemingly, of works and of days." Sainte-Beuve's estimate of Balzac's condition was true enough in spirit, though it lacked literal accuracy. Balzac was but in middle age when the summons came to him; and he had not put forth a line which could suggest that the eye of the mind was dim or the natural force abated. His latest works, "Le Cousin Pons," "La Cousine Bette," are colossal monuments of intellectual strength, of nervous stability. But for nearly three years before his death,

Balzac had written what was for him almost nothing.[1] He had waited and planned, and he had lived, as to material things, on the product of a surely increasing fame, and, as to the things of the spirit, on the hope of a happiness which was to be—well, we have seen how short! Meanwhile, he had suffered in health. The climate of North-Eastern Europe was cruel to an organization that could flourish in the vivacious air of Paris and in the mellow sunshine of Touraine. Furthermore, Balzac had crowded into less than thirty working-years the achievements of a quite uncountable number of ordinary lives. He was old while he was young. Still, Sainte-Beuve did well to recollect and to chronicle what seemed to him the force and the abiding fertility. An inexhaustible genius permitted Balzac still to be young, when he was physically old.

But Sainte-Beuve would never have used, of Balzac, the phrase I have just allowed myself, and which, however the matter may have stood in Balzac's lifetime, does not seem exaggerated to the judgment of to-day—"inexhaustible genius." Sainte-Beuve, when occupied no longer with a dead man's claims to generosity—when guided no more by the *nil nisi bonum* of the mourner, but again by the *nil nisi verum* of the critic—Sainte-Beuve was satisfied with a more limited eulogy. "The talent that has ceased to be": "the vigorous talent." But it is "talent" always—nothing more—and, accordingly, comparisons

[1] "Le Député d'Arcis," the second episode of "L'Envers de l'Histoire Contemporaine," and "La Marâtre."

with contemporaries are made with ease and naturalness, which would now appear to be absurd. Sometimes they are in Balzac's favour: "Of these last three—of Dumas, Eugène Sue, and Balzac—it was Balzac who dug the deepest." But that the comparison should be gravely made, that it should be instituted at all, carries us back to the generation Balzac's had succeeded—to the days when patriotic Germany was capable of thinking that Schiller—because he expressed the people's aspiration, and was in some sense its voice—was for all time Goethe's equal.[1]

Sainte-Beuve, notwithstanding his reasonable unwillingness to ask of any nature more or different fruit than that nature can give—Sainte-Beuve, for all his resolution to accept from Balzac, without cavil, "the rich and complicated legacy he has bequeathed"—would never have been capable of seeing in Balzac what Madame Sand saw plainly. Balzac, for Monsieur de Sainte-Beuve, had observed, with accuracy, three periods of French Society—he had painted the *belles* of the Empire, the great ladies of the Restoration, the *bourgeois* of the July Monarchy. And "Eugénie Grandet" would live. And men would smile at the Birotteaus, and laugh at Gaudissart, and recognize that in the Marneffes and in Cousine Bette exhaustive analysis had been made of the lees of Humanity's cup. But it was charged against the creator of these people that he was prone to exaggeration. To compete with his brother

[1] Sainte-Beuve, of course, had had to make some effort, to be just at all. To say the least, no love had ever been lost between the novelist and the critic.

professors of a Literature that was "devouring and inflammatory," he had put upon his palette colours garish and unreal—he had adopted a diapason that was unnaturally high. He was—I know that I am casting Sainte-Beuve's suave thought into the harshest form that can express it—he was a novelist to catch the public. Madame George Sand saw, on the other hand, that for Balzac "the novel was but the frame and the pretext for an almost universal examination of ideas, sentiments, trades, arts, localities." In those words she stated that conclusion. Sainte-Beuve perceived that at all events Balzac was studying Society. Madame Sand knew that, by whatever means, it was Humanity that he was studying—the Human Nature of every time. And his grasp of that was as wide as it was firm. In his work, which appeared to her as to its mere setting, "*un ensemble de récits très simples*," a "*fabulation peu compliquée*," there was character without end. And she was poet enough to perceive that he too had the "*besoin du poëte*," which is, to seek a something that is ideal in every theme to be treated.[1]

The ideal of many novelists—when they are poetically-minded at all—is sought in the treatment of their heroines. But in regard to the "juvenile heroine," the Frenchman is at a great disadvantage—it is unlikely that he has any acquaintance with her. Unless he

[1] This, perhaps, is a place in which it may be fitting that I should give a list of certain stories of Balzac's, which even the least audacious can read without fear. And this list shall include "La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote," "Eugénie Grandet," "Ursule Mirouët," "Pierrette," "L'Interdiction," "Le Curé de Tours," "César Birotteau," and "La Messe de l'Athée."

belongs to a particular set, just now, in Paris—a small, "advanced," rebellious one, which takes its tone from England, or America, to-day—he is left to his imagination alone. The larger part of Balzac's work was done while his young nieces were still children. I suppose some of his friends had grown-up daughters; but we hear nothing about them. Never, we may be sure, was the author of "Eugénie Grandet" more of a "*voyant*" than when he was depicting the *ingénue*. An open door and a few words heard in passing it—a glance upon the road, or the French contralto voice, serene and consolatory, breaking the silence of a garden—these were the chances, this was the material, which Balzac had to use. In his portraiture of girlhood then, he had the tact to be reticent. Generally, his quite young woman, of regular life and of discreet up-bringing, is more or less a background figure. But she is a creation, for all that; and, in every act that she performs, or word she speaks, you feel it was a poet who made her. "To depict many virgins," said Balzac himself, "what is wanted is—Raphael." His own maidens, in their best maidenhood, are Raphaels indeed; and, very often, early ones. There is Eve Chardon; there is Pierrette Lorain. The spirit of the Madonna del Gran' Duca shines somewhat out of Eugénie Grandet; and in the "Peau de Chagrin," Pauline, not virgin to the end, glows with the Madonna di San Sisto's warmth.

But, however exquisite may be Balzac's selection of types, and however beautiful and significant his work, the conditions of French life, and the obligation of remembering them, limit him continually—as I have already implied

—in his portraiture of girlhood. Balzac had not Mr. Hardy's chance: he was forbidden Mr. Hardy's achievement—the putting into motion, with a dexterity unparalleled in our time, of a whole procession of young women who engage the imagination of the reader; who urge him to a terrible inconstancy—so that when he has thought himself devoted to Bathsheba, he "suffers love" for Fancy Day, and just when it is clear to him that Elfride is the choice of his maturest wisdom, he is claimed and diverted by the magnetic presence of Eustacia Vye.

The true French *ingénue* has her qualities. Balzac has made the most of them. She is capable of abnegation. She has suavity and attractiveness. She is sound in the depths. But, superficially at least, she is a little wanting in variety. Instead of a character with any likeness to the being whom Lord Tennyson has prettily enough described as "a rose-bud, set with little wilful thorns" —the type, the cynic informs me, is fast going out—what she offers for the literary artist's study is a graceful young person whose conversation is practically confined to a "*Oui, madame;*" "*Je vous remercie, monsieur;*" "*O! madame, vous êtes bien aimable!*" *Voyant* though he was, Balzac felt the need of other models than this one. Hence, there was the work-girl (even English novelists of the Society of to-day are perceiving that a young woman who can earn a livelihood is presumably as interesting as a young woman who needs must sit in her father's drawing-room until somebody else invites her to sit in his, instead). Hence, too, Esther Gobseck and Coralie. Hence, the good-natured, but scarcely well-behaved, young ladies, for whom Gambara's wife did

dress-making. Hence, most of all, the type of heroine with whose invention Balzac is credited: the married woman of the world; "*la femme de trente ans.*"

Sainte-Beuve does not contest, for a moment, Balzac's supremacy, or Balzac's sufficiency, here. "Who," he asks, "rendered more deliciously than he, the duchesses and viscountesses of the end of the Restoration—those women of thirty, who, already on the stage, awaited their painter with a vague anxiety, so that when he and they stood face to face there was a certain electric movement of recognition." The reference is, of course, to the success, both personal and literary, which Balzac had with these mature and experienced people. But may I dare to say that the statement appears to be exaggerated, or else that we are in danger of drawing from the statement an inference which the truth of the matter would hardly justify? No doubt, with "the woman of thirty," the portraiture was remarkable. No doubt too, that while it was extremely recognizable, there was in it the measured flattery, the artistic idealization, the "mixture of a lie," in Bacon's phrase, "which doth ever add pleasure." But for my own part I think that with his woman of thirty, however effectively she may appear to sum up within herself the characteristic grace of the Parisienne of her day—with her tact, her social and political influence, her importance in the *salon*, the over-stimulated and slightly morbid imagination of her private hours—Balzac is yet less splendidly true to Humanity's broader lines than when he paints the quiet self-sacrifice of Eugénie Grandet, or Père Goriot's passion of fatherhood.

Mr. Henry James assures us, "Women are the keystone of the 'Comédie Humaine.' If the men were taken out, there would be great gaps and fissures; if the women were taken out, the whole fabric would collapse." Again, a strong way, an over-strong way, of putting the fact; for I have myself, in this brief study, had occasion to discuss more than one story in which it is the character of the man that is the absorbing interest—in which, among the *dramatis personæ*, a man is unquestionably the chief. But our quarrel with Mr. James has no reason to go far. The matter is capable of easy explanation. We shall be with him to this point: we shall admit that while no idealization, no exaggeration, can deprive Balzac's women of their reality and individuality, his men are apt to be failures when they are not quite successes. His important politicians are a little stilted; his men of blood and breeding are sometimes too conscious of their place. His youths are rarely suffered to charm us—egoists and dandies, "dudes" and "chappies" of the period, and we are not perfectly sure that their author is always aware of it. D'Arthez, the important poet—said to have been drawn with a thought of Balzac's self—and Bianchon, the young man of science, whom we meet so often—who walks through the pages of the "Human Comedy," as in life he must have walked, upon professional rounds, through every street of Paris—and David Séchard, at Angoulême, in the simplicity of his work-a-day existence—these men are successes.[1]

[1] D'Arthez—an example, Balzac claims, "*de l'accord d'un beau talent et d'un beau caractère*"—is at his best in "Illusions Perdues." In "Les Secrets de la Princesse de Cadignan" his relations with Diane de Maufrigneuse are a little inexplicable.

The other successes are apt to be with the arch-scoundrel, or with the man of advancing years, and poverty, and trouble. Here, an intense ingenuity; there, a convincing pathos.[1]

Next, perhaps, to the truth and to the variety bestowed by Balzac on his characters, we are to note with what extraordinary "closeness of web" his work was executed. How marvellously small is the proportion of conversation to description and narrative, in his novels! Amongst Balzac's contemporaries, Hugo and George Sand were the most "literary"—amongst those, I mean, who had an individual and an important vision of Life, and did not busy themselves exclusively with the technical problems of Expression. They were—amongst the great in France—the most literary and the most lasting. That must be allowed, even by those of us who do not wish to underrate, for a moment, Théophile Gautier, Alfred de Musset, and Charles Nodier. Well, in closeness of web, Balzac surpassed Hugo, just as much as in truth and variety of character-painting he surpassed George Sand. George Sand's figures are, as portraits, uncertain in outline, and in detail scanty. And, as regards the general closeness of the literary structure, a labour fruitful and serviceable—such as Victor Hugo never wotted of—was Balzac's habitual task. The

[1] Nor must we be very hard on Balzac for his comparative failure to make the young men interesting—for the inadequacy of his effort on the rare occasions on which he elects that they shall occupy the prominent place. For—dare one whisper?—the place accorded to them in English Romance, through "the domestication of the Novel," as Mr. George Moore calls it, is, after all, scarcely the place that young men fill in Life, and the world's business.

labour would never have been undertaken, the results of it would never have been achieved, had the Muse that prompted Balzac been as affluent as Victor Hugo's —a mountain river in the strength and impulse of its stream.

Balzac's vision of life is, habitually, direct and veracious. But his realism admits of Poetry—without it, could he be veracious at all? And now the Poetry is in the general conception, and now it is in the detached thought. But, whether Balzac's mood—the essential mood for the particular work—be prosaic or poetic, firmly realistic or just as unerringly imaginative, we shall find him in the centre of things. He sits in no corner of his own, with pet theories. He is a great artist: not an earnest gospeller, sallying forth from Bergen with his mission of a province and a day. I cannot fancy Ibsen recommending himself hugely to the author of "The Human Comedy." I cannot fancy him summoned, by that great and deep intelligence, to quit, with his imperfect art, on a superfluous errand, his humble, comfortable place. Tolstoi, no doubt, would have had a better chance. Balzac must have recognized, in Tolstoi, a larger vision of the actual world—a capacity that, even from the busy Criticism of the West, asks serious attention. Are we, in an oblique method, criticizing Balzac himself, by suggesting what might be his opinion on some of our contemporaries? Let us be so bold, then, as to conjecture that he would have taken an unaffected interest in Mr. Meredith's labour —that he would have been a willing slave to Mr. Hardy's heroines, and would have gleaned with eagerness philosophy from Mr. Hardy's peasants—and that amidst

Monsieur Zola's roughness, mistakes, and probable mischief, he would have recognized the music and the deep poetry in the descriptions of the garden in "La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret," and in the story of that eventful night in Paris, on which the frail and nervous child waited jealously for her mother, in the "Page d'Amour." With the novel of Commerce — coming perhaps to Englishmen just now as the unchecked record of grotesque adventure over centuries and continents— he, a student of "The Antiquary" and of "Clarissa," could have had nothing to do. We know what he did say to the novel of Commerce, when it was put forth in his own time: — "*Eugène Sue est un esprit borné et bourgeois.*" And, in his admirations, Balzac was just as outspoken. He was wild with envy, he tells De Stendhal, when he read, in the "Chartreuse de Parme," "*cette superbe et vraie description de bataille que je rêvais pour les Scènes de la Vie Militaire. Je vous le dis naïvement. C'est fait comme Wouvermans.*"

I have said, how direct and veracious was Balzac's vision of Life. So veracious was it, that it absolutely forbad him, in his record, to lay on sexual Love the whole of the stress which popular novelist and fluent verse-writer are accustomed to place on it. If he knew that in a certain order of romance, the thrilling adventure and the hair-breadth escape occupied a rank out of all proportion to that which was theirs in the Life he witnessed, he knew also that the chase of the desired person is not the single pleasure nor the principle business that occupies men. To succeed in it, may be to re-invigorate existence. To fail in it, may be

to travel henceforward under darkened skies. But there is, in most cases, to be steadily reckoned with, the bitter and the sweet of a hundred other relationships than that of mistress and lover: the charm of kinship, or its disappointments: the annoyance or the pleasure—it may be the delicate flattery—of daily contact with the world. Then, there is religious enthusiasm. And again, the joy of a vocation followed. Or, failing these, the claim on the attention of merely sordid tasks—of the effort to live—and the increasing sense of money's capacity—the prosaic side of things; the house, and the investment, and the acquired position. Could Balzac, looking at existence firmly and widely, ignore these things? Is it not his inclusion of them, in a sane and candid survey, that ensures for what he produces, acceptance in so many moods and at no special hour? For all his philosophic and mystic excursions—that gave us "Lambert" and gave us "Séraphita"—his "over-mastering sense of this present world," to use a phrase of Mr. James's, is his real characteristic, and it is the foundation of the greater portion of his work.

To deal largely with money, there is wanted, not a tradesman's mind or the mind of a miser, but the mind of a man of imagination. A Silas Marner, counting over his accumulated guineas, does, at the most, a sum in compound addition, and revels in the glitter of his gold. But Balzac and the ideal Chancellor of the Exchequer see further into things: they understand the bearing of a remote cause upon a future result. In Finance, Balzac, though he could not legislate very well for himself, legislated for others to perfection. Into the ways of scraping

wealth together by industry or usury, he had a lifelong insight. He could imagine, too, and he could describe, the methods by which it came to men at a bound. His characters' investments interested him nearly as much as their persons; and, as if to isolate his *dramatis personæ* from those beings of sentiment who were the vaporous creations of his brother romance-writers, he built up about them fortunes in Rentes, and the substantial barriers of a "real estate."[1] And, if it is not enough that they shall live for us by their riches, let them live for us in their "embarrassments," which, like those of the prodigal in the Eighteenth Century comedy, "increase every hour," when it must be that they occur at all.

Sainte-Beuve has had to admit, a little unwillingly, that of the French Society which was the subject of his studies, Balzac succeeded in presenting the comprehensive, almost the final, picture. If Balzac did so, it was because of the perfection of his realization of the world he beheld, and of all its interests. The thing he aimed to accomplish, was accomplished by him. The immense work of Art was for practical purposes completed, and, in the greatness of the conception and the attainment, it is not difficult to forget whatever may be missing, and whatever may be the technical faults. How then is Criticism, if it must disparage, while yet it is too intelligent to disparage meanly—how is it to suggest some want of satisfactoriness in the result of Balzac's insight and of Balzac's labour? To Sainte-Beuve there was vouchsafed a way. The blame he was too generous or too politic

[1] Observe Popinot's masterly dealing with the money position of the D'Espards, in "L'Interdiction."

to cast directly on the chronicler, he cast in part upon the subject of the chronicle and on the fashion of the time. Before another novelist of Balzac's subtlety came to be Society's analyst, Society, he suggested, might offer a different material, and might demand a different service. Meanwhile, for the artist assuredly—perhaps, too, for the world he depicted—there was the need of abstinence, the need of repose. Let the world be given breathing-time, and let the artist force his note no longer. The note of Balzac could not be sustained. "*Souhaitons*," says Sainte-Beuve, "*à l'avenir de notre société des tableaux non moins vastes, mais plus apaisés, plus consolants.*" And, "Let us wish," he adds, "to those who shall paint them, a calmer life, inspirations, not indeed more subtle, but softer, healthier, and more serene."

"No man knoweth the things of a man but the spirit of a man which is in him." It may be there are glimpses of truth in the aspirations of Sainte-Beuve. Yet George Sand, who saw in Balzac what Hugo saw—an "*homme de génie*"—and a creature "essentially good," held that neither Society nor Society's painter could be reproached for Balzac's canvas. George Sand, at least, would have looked forward with confidence to Balzac's final labours. Prosperity, and the calm of a newly-found happiness, would have given, she thought, to his intellect "a gaiety less harsh," and, to the ends of his stories, "a reality less appalling." We may thank the courageous and large-hearted woman for the charity of the surmise. Yet her hope, after all, was the hope of an idealist: and of the possibility of its realization we cannot be sure.

But has the apologist of Balzac any imperative business

to be concerned with the question of what, under changed conditions, Balzac might have become? Is there any need to speculate on what might have happened if another domestic life, perhaps, or another temperament, had made Molière blandly self-contented or obstinately cheerful? Molière would not have been Molière. That is all that we can know. And, similarly, to claim for Balzac, in some impossible future, what cannot be his in our actual experience of him—the pure idealist's charm, the optimist's vision—is to run some chance at least of missing the true value of his work. "*Ne forçons point les natures.*" Was Balzac's gift exceptional? Was his survey wide? His soundings into Humanity's ocean—were they really profound? His record—was it impartial? Was his revelation sincere?

THE END.

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Du Droit d'Ainesse . 1824
Wann-Chlore (Jane la Pâle) 1825
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Scènes de la Vie Privée . 1830

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Le Doigt de Dieu.
Les Deux Rencontres.
L'Expiation.

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Romans et Contes Philosophiques . . . 1831

La Peau de Chagrin.
Sarrasine.
La Comédie du Diable.
El Verdugo.
L'Enfant Maudit.
L'Elixir de Longue Vie.
Les Proscrits.
Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu.
Le Requisitionnaire.
Étude de Femme.
Les Deux Rêves.
Jésus-Christ en Flandre.
L'Eglise.

Nouveaux Contes philosophiques . . . 1832

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Madame Firmiani.
L'Auberge Rouge.
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Le Médecin de Campagne . 1833
Études de Mœurs au xix^e^ Siècle . . . 1834-37
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La Comtesse à deux maris (*Le Colonel Chabert*).
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Adieu.
L'Élixir de Longue Vie.
El Verdugo.
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Jésus-Christ en Flandre.
Melmoth reconcilié à l'Eglise.
Histoire Intellectuale de Louis Lambert.
L'Interdiction.
La Messe de l'Athée.
Les Deux Rêves.
Facino Cane.
Les Martyrs Ignorés.
Le Secret de Ruggieri.
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Une Passion dans le Désert.
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Le Chef-d'œuvre Inconnu.
Gambara.
Massimilla Doni.
Seraphita.

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Le Livre Mystique . . 1835
Le Lys dans la Vallée . 1836
L'Excommunié . . 1837
Histoire de la Grandeur et de la Décadence de César Birotteau . . . 1838
La Femme Supérieure . 1838
Le Cabinet des Antiques . 1839
Une Fille d'Ève . . 1839
Un Grand Homme de Province à Paris . . . 1839
Béatrix 1840
Vautrin, drama . . 1840
Physiologie de l'Employé . 1840
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Ursule Mirouet . . 1842
Monographie de la Presse Parisienne . . . 1842
Histoire de l'Empéreur . 1842
Les Ressources de Quinola, comedy . . . 1842
Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées 1842
Les Deux Frères . . 1842
Œuvres Complètes. La Comédie Humaine . 1842-48
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David Séchard . . . 1843
Un Début dans la Vie . 1844
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Petites Misères de la Vie Conjugale . . . 1845
Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes . . . 1845
Paris marié, philosophie de la Vie Conjugale . . 1846
Histoire des Parents Pauvres . . 1846-47
Le Provincial à Paris . 1847
Un Drame dans les Prisons 1847
La Femme de soixante ans 1847
La Marâtre, drama . . 1848
La dernière Incarnation de Vautrin . . . 1848
Mercadet, comedy . . 1851
Le Faiseur, do. . . . 1853
Théâtre Complet . . 1853
Les Fantaisies de Claudine 1853
Traité de la Vie élégante . 1853
Théorie de la Démarche . 1853
Peines de cœur d'une Chatte Anglaise . . 1853
Le Député d'Arcis . . 1854
Scènes de la Vie de Campagne. Les Paysans . 1855
Le Comte de Sallenauve . 1855
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